

# **Paradise Lost**

**American Myths in Jim Jarmusch's  
*Stranger than Paradise*, *Dead Man*, and  
*Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai***

**by  
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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Jim Jarmusch has frequently been referred to as an outsider in American cinema, almost to the point where “outsider” comes to mean “un-American.” This reputation partially derives from his fascination with marginal characters, living on the outskirts of mainstream society, which in his films often have been represented by the foreigner, or the immigrant. In addition, his work displays remarkable responsiveness towards artistic influence, foreign as well as domestic. And undoubtedly, his work has generally met more praise outside of the U.S., by audience and critics alike, and most of his films have been funded, at least in part, by foreign investors.

However, Jim Jarmusch has always concerned himself with American issues. The period covered by my thesis, the 1980s and 1990s, witnessed the rise and fall of American independent cinema, as well as changes and disputes of a cultural, sociological, and political nature. The films made by Jarmusch during this period reflect these changes, deeply rooted in American history and society as they are. Admittedly, his approaches and portrayals often divert from Middle America, but this constitutes a critical part of his relevance as an American filmmaker. Making his debut in a time of American independent cinematic renaissance, he instantly became one of the leading oppositional voices in an otherwise culturally and politically conservative decade. Moreover, as Hollywood swallowed most of the indie scene in the 1990s, Jarmusch managed to retain his independence, as one of a diminishing group of uncompromising auteurs. It is this combination, of a deeply rooted interest in American society, an unyielding independent spirit, and remarkable openness to aesthetic and intellectual influences from all over the world, that makes Jim Jarmusch a unique, and uniquely relevant, American filmmaker.

Not counting his film school project, *Permanent Vacation* (1980), Jarmusch released six feature films in the 1980s and 1990s: *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), *Down by Law* (1986), *Mystery Train* (1989), *Night on Earth* (1991), *Dead Man* (1995), and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999). Naturally, to include all of them would far exceed the scope of a master’s thesis. Consequently, although they all deal with American aspects, I have selected the three films that most clearly address American topics. *Stranger than Paradise*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog* collectively represent a cross section of Jarmusch’s relation to America, and reveal that his primary concern is revising American myths. More specifically, *Stranger*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog* discuss the American Dream, American history and identity, and American

ethnicity, respectively. Significantly, the selected films also represent Jarmusch at his most topical and innovative.

Jarmusch was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1953, and grew up in a suburban, middle class family. Not finding a lot of cultural stimulus in his industrial surroundings, Jarmusch turned to literature and music as means of escape. Still, Ohio, especially Cleveland (situated near Akron), features prominently in *Stranger than Paradise* and is also mentioned in *Dead Man*, though the area is rather unfavorably depicted. After high school, he left Akron for Chicago to study journalism. However, he soon transferred to Columbia and English and American literature studies. In his senior year he was supposed to go to Paris for a semester, but ended up staying in the French capital for ten months. Spending most of his time at the Cinematheque, the stay opened his eyes to the possibilities of film as an artistic medium. The proprietor and founder, Henri Langlois, was an eccentric character that put on programs that crossed time, tradition, genre, and nationality, and that mixed European and Asian art cinema with classical American cinema and B-movies. The eclectic mix served by Langlois broadened his horizon to films made outside of Hollywood, but the most important revelation was to expose the intricate web of influences, interpretations, and reinterpretations, across cultural and national boundaries, that unites the cinemas of the world, a feature that would also characterize Jarmusch's own films. His experiences in Paris impacted him to the extent that he decided to abandon his literature studies in favor of film school at NYU. Here he met Spike Lee, Tom DiCillo, and Sara Driver, who together with Jarmusch would all play important parts in the burgeoning American independent cinema of the 1980s.

Nevertheless, film was not Jarmusch's only source of inspiration. At this time (late 1970s), he was part of a larger avant-garde downtown New York scene, consisting of musicians, artists, and outsiders. For a period he even played in a post-punk band called the Del-Byzanteens. Complementing his stay in Paris, his involvement in the downtown experimental culture induced him to reject distinctions between high and low art, and to view spirit as more important than technical abilities and virtuoso. Moreover, it made him extremely open to influences, instilled in him a punk attitude of opposition against anything established, and provided him with a network of friends that he would employ as cast and crew in his first movies, many of which he has kept around throughout his career. For instance, this meant casting musicians as actors, an approach that curiously stuck with him (John Lurie features in four of his films), even as his star rose and his network expanded (Tom Waits and Iggy Pop feature in three and two of his films, respectively). As my thesis will reflect, incorporating representatives of rock'n'roll and underground culture in his films is only one of the ways in



which Jarmusch self-consciously situates his work in a tradition of cultural opposition and rebellion.

Having spent his tuition money to finance *Permanent Vacation*, which made NYU cancel his registration, Jarmusch left film school without a degree (years later, he was awarded an honorary degree). Its student film quality aside, already in *Permanent Vacation*, Jarmusch displays many of the traits that would characterize his later work, such as passive characters without goals (a typical punk aesthetic), combined with a self-conscious usage of intertextual references, in this case, to filmmakers (Nicholas Ray, Sergio Leone, Francois Truffaut), writers (Comte de Lautréamont, Jack Kerouac), and musicians (Charlie Parker, Chet Baker).<sup>1</sup>

American Independent Cinema (in the 1980s and 1990s)

Having left school, Jarmusch spent the early 1980s making his first feature film, *Stranger than Paradise*. Although the process, due to funding problems, took years to complete, when the film finally was released, in 1984, it was an instant sensation. There is hardly a single scholarly account on American independent film in the 1980s that fails to mention *Stranger* as a landmark. Its critical acclaim and relative financial success surprised both Jarmusch and the industry alike. It promised a new dawn for independents, and made Jarmusch the hippest name in town.

However, American independent film was of course not born in 1984. In order to fully understand the significance of Jim Jarmusch as an American filmmaker, and as an independent American filmmaker, it is helpful to have a quick look at the history of American independent cinema. However, even a quick look makes it apparent that what constitutes an independent film is very much a question of definition. Generally speaking, there are two separate ways to distinguish an American independent film from studio product, and the debate revolves around which aspect should be the decisive one. First, a film can be classified as independent based on independent financing, meaning that means of production come from other sources than the majors. The other approach is a little more vague. A film can be deemed as possessing, what is sometimes referred to as an independent “spirit,” that is, aesthetics or content that break with the classical Hollywood standard.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On biographical information of Jim Jarmusch, see Juan A. Suarez, *Jim Jarmusch*, Contemporary Film Directors (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 1-28, and “Biography,” *The Jim Jarmusch Resource Page*, <http://www.jim-jarmusch.net/bio/> (August 31, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 3.

Both classifications are problematic, though. For instance, according to the first definition, *Terminator Salvation* (2009) is an American independent film, in spite of its \$200 million budget (making it the most expensive indie in history), simply because it was produced outside of Hollywood.<sup>3</sup> As far as any independent “spirit” is concerned, though, it can hardly be distinguished from any standard action blockbuster coming out of Hollywood in the same year. Conversely, ever since the major studios picked up on the “art-house”-trend of the 1980s, and absorbed independent labels or created their own art-house subdivisions, Hollywood has put out films that have been deemed independent due to quirky content or “experimental” film language. This convergence is perhaps best exemplified by the Independent Filmmaker Project’s (IFP) 1999 decision to open up their Independent Spirit Awards to all films, including studio product, as long as it is made in a “spirit” of independence. As Chris Holmlund explains: “Independent and mainstream feature films are linked together on a sliding scale. Neither ideologically nor economically are they purely antithetical.”<sup>4</sup>

It is in this context, where the majors have achieved such a level of control that the term “American independent” has almost lost all meaning, that Jim Jarmusch’s approach to filmmaking becomes so important. Whether one chooses to focus on independent funding, on artistic freedom, or on originality of subject matter and aesthetics, Jarmusch started out as, and has remained, independent. He has refused to work in Hollywood, despite tempting offers, and still owns the rights to all of his negatives. As far as financing is concerned, his artistic freedom has remained nonnegotiable, which in most cases has meant that his films have been funded by a variety of European, Asian, and American sources. And finally, visually and especially thematically, his work is distinctly different from the average Hollywood output. It is this aspect - his, by any definition, unique independence - that makes Jarmusch one of the most significant American filmmakers of the past decades. As the following chapters intend to show, his films are characterized by a distinct and singular vision that stands out, and deserves attention, due to his position as an artist in a film industry governed by capitalist forces and industrial motives that have even absorbed most of the so-called independent American cinema.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew White, “How *Terminator Salvation* Became the Most Expensive Independent Film of All-Time,” *Examiner.com*, <http://www.examiner.com/indie-movie-in-washington-dc/how-terminator-salvation-became-the-most-expensive-independent-film-of-all-time> (September 02, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Chris Holmlund, introduction to *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

The history of outsider cinema in America, which is as old as the major production companies' efforts to control the industry, reflects the necessity of an alternative to the mainstream. Ever since the inception of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), in 1909, the majors have sought control of everything from production and distribution to exhibition. As a result, even legendary filmmakers such as Frank Capra were bound by studio contracts and subjected to the moguls of the majors. However, there were notable exceptions. Most prominent we find John Cassavetes, often referred to as the father of American independent filmmaking. His debut as a director, *Shadows* (1959), is considered the first American response to the French New Wave.<sup>5</sup> Cassavetes, and his French contemporaries, such as Jean-Luc Godard, and Francois Truffaut, are important influences on Jarmusch's work. Particularly their rebellion against the rules of the classical Hollywood standard - such as its emphasis on cause-effect driven narrative and goal-oriented characters - has been emulated by Jarmusch. In fact, this entire period of sociological, political, and cultural change (the 1950s and 1960s) would in the 1980s be exploited as a rich source of influence for artists and scholars alike, Jim Jarmusch included.

The financial success of indie road movie *Easy Rider* (1969) opened the doors for original, smaller films in the early 1970s, made by a new generation of film school-educated talent, such as Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973). Predictably, though, this also led to Hollywood interest. Consequently, it did not take long before Scorsese and the rest of the "movie brats" were recruited by the major studios. Those who were hoping that this would change the majors from within were sadly disappointed, as it did nothing to change Hollywood expectations of big profits. Following the financial success of *The Godfather* (1972), *Jaws* (1975), and *Star Wars* (1977), focus shifted from small films to big-budget blockbusters.<sup>6</sup>

However, paralleling the revolt in the 1960s and early 1970s against large, all-style-and-no-content spectacles, the 1980s brought similar reactions against the focus on blockbusters. The renaissance of independent cinema was in part a byproduct of technical advancements. The video-revolution opened up new markets for independent companies due to increasing demand for films, markets the majors were slow to catch on to. This effect was strengthened by the expansion of cable and broadcast television. In addition, film festivals targeting smaller films made by independent auteurs also grew in popularity and frequency. All this reflected

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<sup>5</sup> Richard K. Ferncase, *Outsider Features: American Independent Films of the 1980s*, Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture, Number 52 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

that there was a segment of the audience, the so-called “specialty” market, that was just waiting for more personal films made by filmmakers that actually had something to say.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, by the time *Stranger than Paradise* hit the market, the ground had already been fertilized. Neither was Jarmusch the only independent filmmaker to receive favorable reviews and do well at the box office at the time. John Sayles, David Lynch, Wayne Wang, the Coen brothers, Spike Lee, and Susan Seidelman, all had their breakthroughs in the 1980s, truly a golden age for American independents.<sup>8</sup> All too soon, however, did most of the once independent filmmakers move into studio productions. As mentioned, Hollywood was slow to recognize the new markets, but as more and more indies began making money (where Steven Soderbergh’s *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989) is the quintessential example), the majors were swift in rectifying the situation. The early 1990s therefore witnessed a range of mergers between the majors and independent studios, such as Miramax’s merger with Disney in 1993. Moreover, most majors formed so-called “independent” arms, designed for the newfound specialty market. As a result, reiterating what happened in the late 1970s, the 1990s saw increasing expectations regarding profits on indies, which in turn meant increasing budgets.<sup>9</sup>

For certain, Jarmusch’s budgets increased as well. Whereas *Stranger than Paradise* had a budget of \$90,000,<sup>10</sup> and *Down by Law* cost \$1,100,000,<sup>11</sup> *Dead Man* totaled at \$9,000,000.<sup>12</sup> However, contrasting most of the indie wonders of the 1980s, Jarmusch remained staunchly independent, even in the 1990s. This meant that he had to shop around for financial backing until he found someone willing to fund his films without interfering with the creative process, which often involved a number of producers, sharing the risks. *Dead Man*, for instance, was produced by Pandora Filmproduktion (Germany), JVC Entertainment Networks (Japan), Newmarket Capital Group (U.S.), and 12 Gauge Productions (U.S.).<sup>13</sup> For most filmmakers, the differences between studio product and independent work eroded in the 1990s, but Jarmusch continued to insist on complete artistic control: “The only thing that matters to me is to protect my ability to be navigator of the ship. I decide how the film is cut, how long it is, what music is used, who the cast is. I make films by hand.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ferncase, 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Holmlund, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Levy, 498-504.

<sup>10</sup> “Stranger than Paradise,” *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088184/> (August 31, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> “Down by Law,” *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090967/> (August 31, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> “Dead Man,” *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112817/> (August 31, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Jarmusch, *Filmmaker*, Fall 1996, quoted in Levy, 182.

Ironically, therefore, the success of American indies in the 1980s in many ways meant the death of indies in the 1990s. Through osmosis, if you will, the majors absorbed both independent talent, and their way of making movies, through “indie” subdivisions. Still, what does it matter how the films are made, as long as an independent spirit is maintained? The problem is, as the occurrences of the 1970s and the 1990s tell us, that Hollywood absorbing the outsiders has always meant a shift in focus from smaller films to bigger, fewer productions, because small profits are simply not in the majors’ interests. What attracted Hollywood to the indie scene and indie filmmakers in the 1980s - success stories such as *Sex, Lies, and Videotapes* - could not be duplicated to the extent that the majors expected. The proceedings of the 1970s and the 1990s consequently demonstrate the necessity for filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch. The financial objectives of the multi-billion dollar industry that constitutes Hollywood inherently compromise the creative process of filmmaking. Truly independent filmmaking, meaning auteurs that see creative control as nonnegotiable, are therefore crucial if we wish to see a variety of voices on film. Accordingly, the films of Jim Jarmusch deserve attention, as the works of one of the leading voices of American independent film, and even more to the point, as the work of one of America’s few *truly* independent filmmakers.

## Culture Wars

The import of independence can be further clarified by a look at the sociopolitical context of the 1980s and 1990s. As my chapters will reflect, Jarmusch’s films are characterized by his role as an outsider. As mentioned, his films are very much American in subject matter, but his approach is very different from that of mainstream Hollywood output. The most important difference is that Jarmusch actually seeks complexities and contradictions. For instance, it is often difficult to identify definite conclusions in his work. This is because he views American realities, and, indeed, realities of human existence, as more complex than what the neat narratives and happy, conclusive endings of classical Hollywood would have us believe. Nonetheless, other than calling for a complication of the story, his work is characterized more by what it opposes than by what it advocates. As I intend to show, Jarmusch uses different methods and strategies to align himself with the opposition, be it historical, contemporary, artistic, academic, or political. *Stranger than Paradise*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog* were made in a period of cultural turmoil, resembling the upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s, in the sense that conservative and liberal forces were fighting over the cultural landscape of America.

Jarmusch often draws parallels between the two periods, in order to reveal the dangers of suppressive ideologies, as well as simultaneously place himself and his own work in a tradition of rebels and outsiders.

The particulars of the cultural disputes that Jarmusch's films reflect will be discussed in detail under each film's chapter, but I think it will be useful to say a little bit here about the general controversies that color all three films. The early 1980s were characterized by the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the conservative sociopolitical climate favored and partly created by his administration. As my analysis of *Stranger than Paradise* will point out, Jarmusch rebels against the stifling cultural conformity of the 1980s by comparing it to the "fifties" of the Eisenhower era. Not surprisingly, when such conformity eventually was challenged, from the mid-1980s onwards, reformists were met with resistance from reactionary forces. The academic field of history would prove to be a particularly conflicted area. After all, culture wars are about identity, about who we are, or, rather, who we want to be, and history is one of the most important ways of communicating such an identity, to our children, and ourselves.

*History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* tells of how an attempt to set some new national standards for history, as one of five school subjects, led to very heated and public confrontations in the media between revisionists and conservatives, from 1994 to 1996.<sup>15</sup> That such an undertaking was even attempted reflects that some changes had occurred in the American political and cultural landscape since the release of *Stranger than Paradise* a decade earlier. Of course, Reagan had been replaced, first by Bush in 1988, succeeded by Clinton in 1992. Although Bush actually launched plans for education reform in 1989, the national standards movement did not begin its work until Clinton's presidency, in 1992, which was generally more open to progressive policies. Second, and perhaps of greater importance, historians had begun revising the history of the American West, which, regarding American self-consciousness, in many ways constitutes the history and identity of America as a whole. Building on ideas of the counterculture and the social and political changes of the 1950s and 1960s, the New Western History movement, beginning in the 1980s, argued that the old doctrines, as symbolized by Turner's Frontier Thesis, were in need of reform. They were seen as too narrow in scope, too focused on the positive outcomes of the western expansion, and too simplified. Therefore, New Western historians started to write the stories

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<sup>15</sup> Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, First Vintage ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2000) (All subsequent references to the National History Standards controversy are to this edition).

they felt were missing, such as the stories of marginalized ethnic groups, women, the failures, and the genocide on Native Americans.<sup>16</sup> In spite of a change in government, however, the standards movement met with enormous opposition. The level of resistance reflects the many people, groups, and interests who disagreed with the “new” portrayals, but also what an important role history plays when it comes to a nation’s self-perception and national identity. Although the National History Standards were never intended to be anything but a voluntary resource for schools and teachers, the right-wing were outraged, because they viewed the new standards as too relativistic, too depressive, and as putting too much blame on white male heroes.

*Dead Man* (1995) puts Jarmusch in the midst of these cultural battles. A revisionist western, the film parallels the New Western History movement on several accounts. It shows awareness of the strong links between history and identity through its depiction of the present as past. Moreover, it matches, or even surpasses New Western historians in its break with the frontier thesis, through its damning depiction of western expansion, portraying the frontier as degenerating, not invigorating. However, in all its anger against ruthless capitalism and moral decline, *Dead Man*’s role in the culture wars is better characterized by what the film opposes, than by what the film promotes. It asks a lot of questions, but offers no clear-cut solutions. Instead, what identifies it as liberal is first and foremost its rebellion against conservatism. As seen through *Dead Man*, Jarmusch’s main argument in favor of revisionism is that in order to understand ourselves, and not repeat the mistakes of the past, we must complicate our stories. The failures and contradictions of our past are most dangerous, and most likely to be repeated, if they are ignored or suppressed.

In relation to the National Standards controversy, one of the main conservative arguments claimed that the new focus on minorities and culture clashes threatened the unity of the nation. The reasoning was that shedding light on the failures of the past would only emphasize present ethnic and cultural differences. The opposition eventually saw to it that the National History Standards were never ratified in full by any state. Nonetheless, large numbers of educators and school districts came to use the standards as a resource, indicated by the over 90,000 copies distributed.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as the century was drawing to a close, perceptions were in motion, as illustrated by one small incident. In 1999, Colonial

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<sup>16</sup> On the New Western History movement, see Charles S. Peterson, “Speaking for the Past,” in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 767-768, and Patricia Nelson Limerick, “What on Earth Is the New Western History?” in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 84-88.

<sup>17</sup> Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, xviii.

Williamsburg decided to add more focus to the African American experience (African Americans constituted half of Williamsburg's eighteenth century population) by, among other things, staging more plays depicting slavery. Although the reenactments brought controversy and the public responded with mixed emotions, few wanted a return to the "historically sterilized Williamsburg of thirty years ago, a colonial fantasy town that was clean, cheery, and white."<sup>18</sup>

1999 also saw the release of Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*. Similar to *Dead Man*, it too debates the changing American identity, or more specifically, American ethnic identity, by stressing that the multicultural aspect of America has led to an increasingly consent-based culture, meaning that through interpretation and reinterpretation cultures and individuals incorporate ethnic signifiers of other cultures. The result is not an eradication of ethnicity, but ethnic distinctions and borders become increasingly difficult to define. Jarmusch further argues that whether we like it or not, change is inevitable, and irrevocable, and any attempt at putting a lid on the changes, or return to the days of old, is futile and dangerous. Jarmusch does not, however, paint a rosy-red picture of multiculturalism. Culture clashes and racism are very much present in *Ghost Dog*, but, as in *Dead Man*, the bottom line is that the complexity of society must be addressed, even if that means acknowledging the dark and contradictory aspects of our culture. To do otherwise, to portray the present, or the past, as "clean, cheery, and white," even in the name of communal unity, is delusory and harmful. The right-wing campaign against the National History Standards called for a return to "basic facts." Both *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* reflect Jarmusch's assertion, however, that no such thing exists. Our renditions of present and past are essentially artifacts, and consequently in need of continuous revision.

Without reading too much into origins, Jarmusch's journey, from seeking refuge in literature and music in homogenous Akron, to the aesthetic multitude of the Parisian Cinematheque, to vibrant multicultural downtown New York, speaks of an affinity for anything contrasting the static, tried-and-true, simplifying Grand Narrative of the right-wing. It is this opposition that best characterize and unite *Stranger than Paradise*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog*. Paralleling the National History Standards movement and the New Western History movement, Jarmusch is afraid of replacing one mythology with another. Consequently, he does not offer any definite alternatives to what he opposes, but welcomes debate, by presenting a diversity of (contradictory) stories. Rebellion against orthodoxy and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., xv.



myth is essentially his one true agenda, and in that sense, he has managed, through his unyielding independence, to remain, in the language of his adversaries, an American maverick.

## Methods and Historiography

In my approach to the study of *Stranger than Paradise*, *Ghost Dog*, and *Dead Man* I have not employed any one particular method, but rather opted for an interdisciplinary approach, covering such various fields as film studies, literary theory, sociology, and history. Applying multiple methods seems appropriate for a master's thesis in North-American studies. After all, my courses and seminars have themselves covered a wide range of academic fields and subjects, such as film, literature, history, and politics. Furthermore, the scholarly field of North-American studies does not front only one method. However, I would argue that its interdisciplinary approach is actually one of its strongholds. The study of various fields instills an understanding of America and Americans that surpasses any one discipline. By combining knowledge, methods, and analyses of various disciplines, a deeper understanding of the whole, as well as of its various parts, is the intended result. As my analysis will reflect, such an approach is also in keeping with Jarmusch's vision. His films are tapestries of influences, and they all approach their subjects from multiple angles. I would therefore maintain that any analysis that holds as its objective to understand as much as possible of Jarmusch's multifaceted works, necessarily must follow his lead and view them from as many angles as possible. Consequently, I have attempted to approach his films with as open a mind as the scope, length, and allotted time of a master's thesis allows for.

In order to avoid repetition, I have arranged my thesis according to the selected films, rather than themes. Furthermore, I discuss the films in reversed chronological order, which might seem somewhat unconventional at first, but the reason is purely pragmatic. Jarmusch's first film, *Stranger than Paradise*, only touches upon subjects and approaches that are more fully developed in *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*. Consequently, it makes more sense to problematize and theorize these aspects of his films, such as his use of postmodernism and intertextuality, where they most prominently feature, instead of where they first appear chronologically.

Although, as shown above, Jim Jarmusch is one of the most important and critically acclaimed American filmmakers of the past decades, very little scholarly work has been devoted to the man or his films. Juan A. Suarez's *Jim Jarmusch* (2007) is actually the first

comprehensive study of the filmmaker's work in English. Covering his entire career so far, it combines biographical info with analysis of all his films, in relation to American independent cinema. The only other lengthy English study is Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Dead Man* (2000), which is a detailed analysis of different themes and aspects of Jarmusch's *Dead Man*. In addition, I have found some articles particularly useful, such as Melinda Szaloky's "A Tale N/Nobody Can Tell: The Return of a Repressed Western History in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*," and Gregg Rickman's "The Western Under Erasure: *Dead Man*."

Inevitably, therefore, I have had to rely to a great extent on my own analysis and findings. This has been a challenging venture, but also one that I have found immensely thrilling and rewarding, allowing me to plow some new ground, instead of just hacking up a summary of preexisting research. Another beneficiary byproduct of such a lack of material has been to induce me to consult disciplines other than film studies, in order to support my reasoning and to put Jarmusch's work in a sociohistorical context. Consequently, my findings are, as mentioned, still very much founded on research, but in fields as varied as literary theory, historiography, and hip-hop studies, in addition to film studies. Significantly, such an approach has also opened my eyes to Jarmusch's unabated concern for American themes. Perhaps blinded by the formal multiplicity and universality of Jarmusch's work, meaning the way he incorporates cinematic influences and traditions from all over the world, film critics and scholars have largely ignored the ways in which such formal choices consistently function to situate his work in a particularly American sociohistorical context. Therefore, my analysis can be distinguished as one of very few comparative studies of Jarmusch's work, and, essentially, as one that focuses on Jarmusch as a decidedly *American* filmmaker.

To this it should be added that, to the extent that I relate Jarmusch's work to scholars and movements, such as Sollors' ideas on ethnicity, Cullen's views on the American Dream, and the New Western History movement, my intention is not to suggest that Jarmusch is directly influenced by, or even aware of such academic trends. Rather, the point of the parallels is to reveal Jarmusch as part of a generation - to which the aforementioned academic movements and intellectuals also belong - highly indebted to, and affected by, the ideas and legacy of the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s. In other words, Jim Jarmusch is an American filmmaker that, despite a reputation of hipster cool, is firmly grounded in a sociological, political, and historical context.

## Chapter 2. American Ethnicity in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*

It is bad when one thing becomes two. One should not look for anything else in the Way of the Samurai. It is the same for anything else that is called a Way. If one understands things in this manner, he should be able to hear about all Ways and be more and more in accord with his own.

Yamamoto Tsunemoto, *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*

Jarmusch has often been referred to as an outsider, as a stranger in his own land. And, indeed, most of his films are concerned with minorities and outsiders, often exemplified by the immigrant. However, none of them makes ethnicity their primary focus of interest to the extent that *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* does, to which the large selection of various ethnic groups depicted - ranging from African Americans and Italian Americans, to Haitians, Hispanics and Cayuga - is in itself a testament. The citation above is one of the fifteen excerpts from *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai* that together form the structure of *Ghost Dog*. It serves as epigraph for this chapter because it eloquently summarizes many of the main points the film makes about contemporary American ethnicity. What these points constitute, I will discuss in detail below. Suffice it to say here that they all conform to the film's overarching agenda, which is to dispel some of the myths that still surround American ethnicity. Popular views of American ethnicity, such as those represented by the Melting Pot and the Salad Bowl theories, do no longer (if they ever did) capture the complex and evolving nature that characterizes American ethnicity. *Ghost Dog* argues that in a multiethnic society such as the United States, ethnic identity is not only decided by heritage, but is to a large extent influenced by groups and individuals' abilities to absorb and incorporate ethnic signifiers of other cultures.

The term "ethnicity" may seem straightforward enough, but even the most superficial plunge into the scholarly world of ethnicity reveals murky waters. Werner Sollors compares trying to define ethnicity to attempting to grab the content of a water balloon. No matter where you squeeze the essence will only shift its position. Similarly, the essence of ethnicity is difficult to get at. Any neat, clear-cut definition will always leave important aspects unaddressed. Let us therefore start at the most basic level, by looking at the etymology of the term. In his influential work, *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), Sollors explains that, "Ethnicity" derives from Greek "ethnikos" (meaning "gentile" or "heathen") and "ethnos" (meaning "people," but also "others"). In English usage gentile was of course interpreted as non-

Christian, rather than non-Israelite. This reference persists until the mid-nineteenth century when the understanding of ethnic as “peculiar to a race or nation” emerges.

All of these different meanings continue to influence the way we interpret contemporary ethnicity. Ethnicity is still by many scholars defined as a feature reserved for other groups than the dominant one (as in the “others”), and consequently the term almost inherently, although not intentionally, is blemished with the derogatory association of different, or (morally) inferior (as in “heathen”), which the Puritan understanding of ethnic or “hethnic,” as it was sometimes spelled, illustrates. When Native Americans were referred to as ethnics, it was usually in a normative context, discussing (the right) code of conduct. It is important to keep in mind, though, that Indian nations as well often viewed themselves as “the people” and referred to other groups in derogatory terms. The Algonquins, for instance, named themselves “people of the other side,” while their names for other groups were less flattering: Iroquois means “real adders,” Mohawk means “cannibals” or “cowards,” and Pequot translates to “destroyers.”<sup>19</sup> Consequently, for our purpose it is better to transcend such sociological phenomena of “us vs. them” and instead define ethnicity as a phenomenon pertaining to all groups, including the dominant one. This way the unfortunate connotation of “different” is avoided and it is easier to give various groups equal treatment. Such an approach also clarifies another problematic aspect of limiting ethnicity to marginal groups, namely that one and the same group can be both the dominant group and a minority, depending upon the context. For instance, people of Italian heritage would in Italy be the dominant group, and therefore referred to as not possessing ethnicity, while the same people would for instance in the United States be regarded as an ethnic minority, as Italian Americans, once thought of as inassimilable.

The understanding of ethnicity as “peculiar to a race or a nation” is also still relevant. Up until the 1940s race was used to describe not only differences of a physical nature, but also differences based on so-called inner features, such as nationality, culture, or language. Accordingly there were references to the Jewish race, the Italian race, the Irish race, et cetera. WWII put an end to most race theories, however, and ethnicity gradually replaced the by now tainted term “race.” Nonetheless, many scholars continue to distinguish between race and ethnicity. Race is, however, a problematic category. It is based on supposedly discernable biological discrepancies. But the fact that it today is a category reserved for only a few selected groups indicates that racial categories are only applied between ethnic groups whose

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<sup>19</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 24-31.

biological phenomena are deemed sufficiently different. For instance, it is generally agreed upon that Italian Americans and African Americans are of different races, but does Japanese Americans constitute a separate race? Moreover, an individual deemed to be African American might in actuality be, for example, African Scottish Italian Mexican American, of which the phenomena of the “one-drop-rule” and “passing” are infamous examples. Moreover, given that race is based on physical criteria, it does not distinguish between, for example, a first generation Nigerian immigrant to the U.S. and an African American, although their ethnic identities might be miles apart. In other words, all races are ethnic groups, but not all ethnic groups are races. Ethnicity therefore seems to be the preferable category, because it is more inclusive than race, and it does not stigmatize certain groups.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, terms such as “black” and “white” should be viewed as umbrella terms, covering all ethnic groups of African and European descent, respectively.

Consequently, the flexible, fluid nature of ethnicity should not be considered a weakness of the category, but rather as one of its strongholds. As my discussion of *Ghost Dog* intends to show, the content and boundaries of American ethnicity are continuously changing, and, accordingly, any category seeking to explain such a phenomenon must necessarily be loosely defined. Where race fails to explain the intricacies of contemporary Americans’ heritage and cultural identities, the flexibility of ethnicity makes it an enduring term that can be adjusted to explain the complex and ever-changing concept of what it means to be an American.

Nonetheless, my analysis of *Ghost Dog* will also reflect that ignoring race entirely, although it is a troublesome category, is delusionary and inaccurate. The endurance of race in the ethnicity debate is closely linked to the persistence of racism in our societies, as is the desire to discard with the category. All ethnic groups once deemed inassimilable, including Italian Americans, experienced discrimination upon their arrival to America. However, whereas Italian Americans, and all other white groups, have now become part of the majority, and their ethnicities are no longer thought of as threatening, some groups, people of African descent especially, are still discriminated against because of their (perceived) race, not their ethnicity. In other words, perceptions cannot be ignored. The fact that a person is perceived as “black” - disregarding that person’s actual origins, as Nigerian, Haitian, African Mexican American, or whatever – also needs to be addressed. To ignore the fact that ethnic groups of African descent are by many still viewed as one race, because it is inconvenient, only clouds our judgment to the persistence of racism. In summation, therefore, ethnicity, and race,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 36-39.

remain problematic terms, and therefore hard to define. However, as *Ghost Dog* argues, such intricacies are only reflections of the complexities of any multicultural society. Accordingly, in order to surpass the damaging simplifications of myth, we must not shy away from the problematic and contradictory aspects of our culture, but describe them in full.

*Ghost Dog* is set in an unidentified, post-industrial urban landscape (but which looks like Jersey City and Upstate New York, an assumption supported by the end credits' list of locations). Its protagonist, Ghost Dog, is an African American samurai working as a hit man for an Italian American mob crew. The story tells us that he ended up in this "profession" after an episode in his youth, when he was attacked by a couple of white street thugs. A member of the mafia, Louie, intervened and killed one of the assailants, which eventually led Ghost Dog to devote his life to the teachings of *Hagakure: The Book of The Samurai*, and to make himself Louie's faithful retainer. The plot begins as Ghost Dog is assigned the killing of Handsome Frank, a member of Louie's crew, an action that ironically causes the mafia to go after Ghost Dog to avenge the murder they themselves ordered. As it turns out, though, Ghost Dog is a far superior warrior and takes them out one by one, but he decides to spare the lives of Louise Vargo (the boss's daughter) and of course Louie. In what the characters themselves refer to as the final shoot out scene, Louie kills an essentially unarmed Ghost Dog (he has removed all the cartridges from his weapon), a hit ordered by the new boss of the family, Louise. This, we understand, is Ghost Dog's final and ultimate act of loyalty towards his master.

Based on this brief summary, *Ghost Dog* does not seem to have a lot to do with American ethnicity. However, although structurally it is more linear and conventional than *Stranger than Paradise* and *Dead Man*, the essence of the work is not to be found in the narrative itself. The narrative is better understood as a framework in which different layers of meaning can be established and developed. This is not to say that Jarmusch does not employ structural and stylistic elements to convey meaning; quite the contrary. In fact, Jarmusch uses the very first scene (after opening credits) to establish many of the film's motifs. After an establishing shot of a pigeon coup, the camera via a dissolve zooms in on Ghost Dog sitting in his shed reading. The camera then zooms in on and lingers on the cover of the book, making sure that the viewer catches the title: *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*. A cut is made to a POV shot of the page he is reading, which is also read by Ghost Dog in voiceover (see figure 1). This subjective, non-limited access into Ghost Dog's mind induces the viewer already from the start to identify with the protagonist. The particular segment he is reading is not random, either. Stating that, "the way of the samurai is found in death," it neatly connects the film's

opening to its ending, by foreshadowing the death of our main character. Even more to the point, it reveals the huge impact this book has on Ghost Dog's life. Such an interpretation, that he lives and will most likely die the way of a samurai, is substantiated by a series of brief shots of some important props in the shed; notably a couple of shots of some Eastern altars, a shot of Ghost Dog's guns, one of his books, and curiously, a shot of a picture of a girl. The significance of the latter prop is in typical Jarmuschian fashion never explained. Nonetheless, after only one sequence, we do know that Ghost Dog is an African American living in a shed on the roof, next to a pigeon coop, that he is interested in literature, Asian philosophy and spirituality, and that he lives and will most likely die by the sword, the way of a modern-day samurai.

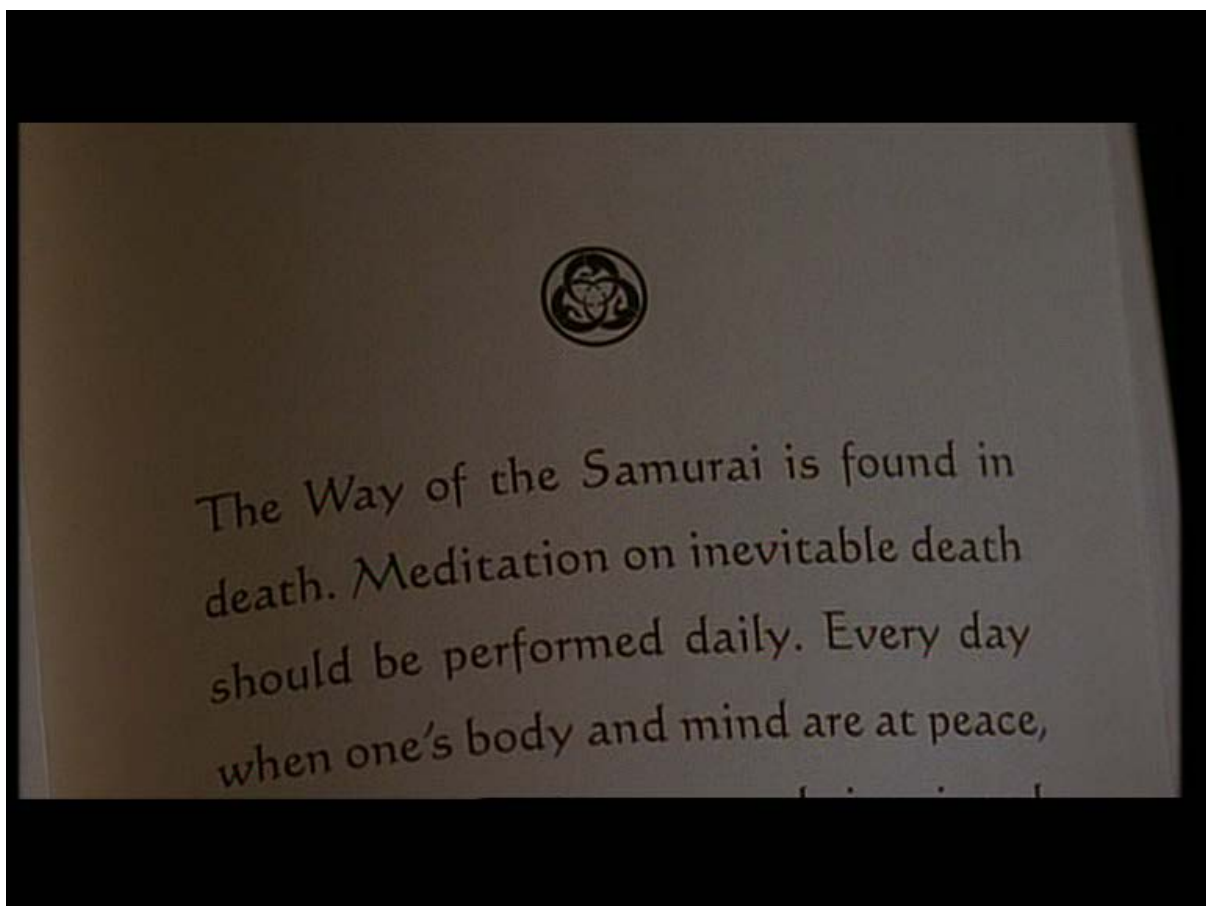


Figure 1. *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (screenshot)

In other words, we are dealing with a rather unusual portrayal of an African American film character. Moreover, the truly refreshing aspect of this portrait is not that Ghost Dog has chosen such original ways to express his ethnic identity, but that his ethnic expressions are in fact of his own choosing, his own creation. Consequently, the most important argument Jarmusch's film makes about American ethnicity is that it is dominated by individual choice,

by what Werner Sollors refers to as “consent.” This leads us straight to the heart of the scholarly debate on American ethnicity. As touched upon above, the complex field of study that ethnicity is makes it a vast battle field of contested ideas, but the main conflict still seems to revolve around two extreme positions. Sollors labels these two “consent” and “descent,” where consent represents the voluntary aspects, illustrated by law or marriage, while descent represents the involuntary, relations inherited by blood or nature.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the debate revolves around whether ethnic identity is decided by birth, or whether it is a matter of free will; descent vs. consent. Although these two positions are seemingly conflicting, they are best viewed as two convergent ends of a continuum, where most scholars argue a compromise between the two extremes. Accordingly, *Ghost Dog* does not suggest a shift in paradigm, but is a valuable contribution to an already existing debate because of its emphasis on consent, of each individual’s ability, and indeed, possibility of creating his/her own tailored expressions of ethnic identity in contemporary American society. As I intend to demonstrate, this main argument has three supplementing branches. First, since ethnic identity is largely voluntary, ethnic groups are not distinct entities, but dynamic parts of a whole, meaning that ethnic interaction is highly prevalent. Second, consent simultaneously leads to, and is a result of, interpretation and reinterpretation of all viable cultural expressions, not only within the group. And finally, the dynamic, evolving, and unpredictable aspects of consent mean that change is continuous and inevitable.

Accordingly, at the heart of consent-based ethnicity we find a rejection of artificially constructed cultural boundaries. Acknowledging the large role consent plays in a person’s ethnic identity frees the individual from restraining cultural divisions of “us” vs. “them.” Significantly, viewing ethnic boundaries as illusive and easily transgressed consequently offers hope concerning culture clashes, because it minimizes cultural differences. On the other hand, consent-based ethnicity might also be regarded as provocative and transgressive to those that regard divisions as comforting and secure.

## Characterization

As the opening sequence (described above) is an example of, the character portrayals are the most easily identifiable aspect through which the film conveys the voluntary aspect of ethnic signification. And, indeed, a focus on characterization has been the most prevalent approach

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3-19.



to talking about cinematic depictions of American ethnicity. As argued by Steve Neale, this is a result of an emphasis on stereotypes that perhaps has not been very fruitful. Besides relying too heavily on analysis of character and characterization, thereby ignoring other narrative and stylistic structures, as well as the form and function of a character, he argues that a focus on stereotypes is problematic for the following reasons. One is the problem of establishing exactly what characteristics are stereotypical, which (taken to an extreme) would require a comparison of all texts, since the nature of a stereotype is that it is reproduced in sufficiently large numbers. Equally difficult to identify would be the “the real,” meaning the perceived “real” characteristics of an ethnic group to which a portrayal is compared. Complicating the issue even further, this illusive “real” is usually a positive image, an ideal.

Consequently, an emphasis on stereotypes becomes an unproductive approach to analysis of character and characterization. The solution, Neale maintains, is to shift the attention from “repetition” to “difference.” Instead of looking for the way a stereotype is repeated, we should look for the way a text creates racial differences, meaning that in order to fully understand a text’s portrayal of ethnicity we must take into account that each text is a creation, and thereby normative, and that each portrayal therefore is different. Accordingly, any analysis of ethnicity in a text should also take into account all narrative and stylistic aspects that make a portrayal unique, and not be blinded by discussions of whether or not a portrait is “realistic” enough.<sup>22</sup> My analysis is on this point highly indebted to Neale’s ideas. Consequently, to the extent that I debate character features, the focus will be on the functions of the characterizations, not on whether or not various ethnic groups are stereotypically portrayed. It should be added, though, that characterization remains an important and potent aspect of narration, and should therefore not be overlooked, but, as I intend to show, characterization is only one of the many formal elements *Ghost Dog* employs in its representation of ethnicity.

As mentioned, *Ghost Dog* is the most remarkable ethnic portrayal of Jarmusch’s. From the very beginning it is made clear that this is a character that is not constricted by any conventions or expectations as to how an African American should express his identity. Although the why and when are never specifically addressed, it seems plausible to assume that it was the near-death experience that led him to reinvent himself as a samurai. His reinvention shifts him from being a victim, an oppressed individual, to becoming a master of his own world, a ghost-like warrior, revered not only for his lethal skills, but also for his

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<sup>22</sup> Steve Neale, “The Same Old Story: Stereotypes and Difference,” *Screen Education* 32/33 (Autumn/Winter 1979/80), in *The Screen Education Reader: Cinema, Television, Culture*, ed. Manuel Alvarado, Edward Buscombe and Richard Collins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 41-47.

wisdom and learning. Still, the truly important aspect here is the matter-of-fact manner in which this aspect of Ghost Dog is presented. Seemingly it is as natural for him to turn to Asian philosophy, spirituality, and warrior culture in time of need as it is for him to wear his hair braided, or listen to hip-hop, jazz, and reggae, features more often associated with film depictions of African American characters. The reasons behind Ghost Dog's affinity for Asian traditions are never sufficiently explained, or even addressed. The result is that this eccentric part of his ethnic identity comes across as a natural part of his persona, as if he was somehow "born" to be a samurai.

In other words, it is not the unconventionality of the portrait itself that is important, the fact that Ghost Dog is an African American samurai. After all, this aspect of his ethnicity is, as mentioned, countered with more conventional ethnic characteristics, such as his musical preferences, or even the fact that he is yet another movie portrayal of a criminalized young black man. The significance of Jarmusch's version of an African American man is not based on whether or not it is a stereotypical portrait, whether he is too black, or not black enough. Rather, the true originality of the portrayal is to be found in the way Ghost Dog relates to other cultures. In other words, the importance of *Ghost Dog's* views on ethnicity is not to be found in the film's treatment of different ethnic groups, be it African Americans, Italian Americans, Haitians, or Cayugas, but in its concepts of American ethnicity as a whole, the way that groups and individuals relate to each other. Accordingly, any discussion of the portrayal of Ghost Dog focusing on his characteristics in relation to a "real" or "ideal" African American misses the point, as the specific ethnicity of the character (in this case African American), or the specific cultural aspects (in this case Asian) that he has incorporated into his own background could just as easily have been replaced, without the film losing any of its relevance regarding ethnicity. Consequently, my focus will be directed to the more general aspect of the portrayal, the fact that Ghost Dog incorporates cultural expressions of other ethnic groups into his ethnic identity and makes them his own, and that consent plays just as significant a role as descent in shaping his ethnic identity.

Jarmusch employs many strategies in conveying just how big a part of Ghost Dog's identity the Asian influence has become. The most striking is of the course the fifteen excerpts from *Hagakure* (see figure 1). Serving a structural function similar to the dark frames that punctuate scenes in *Stranger than Paradise* and *Dead Man*, the paragraphs are displayed on screen in white on black and read by Ghost Dog in voiceover. As will be explained below, these quotations function on several levels. One function, however, is to inform the viewer of just how big a role samurai philosophy plays in Ghost Dog's life. Scenes

of Ghost Dog practicing his sword fighting and meditating add to such an impression, and leave little doubt as to the sincerity of his devotion. Nonetheless, Ghost Dog is not a Japanese eighteenth century samurai. He is very much a modern man; in dress (black fatigues and hoodie), in style (braided hair), in equipment (high tech “key” that unlocks all cars), in weaponry (modern guns, rifles, silencers), in musical tastes, and so on. He simply reinterprets the ancient traditions to fit the time and place in which he lives. Similarly, he is no more Japanese for adhering to the samurai code. Rather, he has reinterpreted a cultural tradition and given it his very own expression because it appeals to his needs and identity. That it happens to be Japanese is only incidental. It is the content, the quality of a cultural expression and tradition that decides whether or not it is desirable, not its origin.

Related to the debate on stereotypes, and constituting an important part of the larger ethnicity debate, is the question of authenticity. The discussion revolves around who is qualified to give an “authentic” rendition of a given ethnic group? On the whole, works by insiders (members of the group in question) are viewed as more authentic than a portrayal by an outsider. However, by glorifying insider portrayals, we only embrace what Sharon Willis refers to as the “privilege not to know.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, leaving studies of other ethnic groups to insiders can easily become an excuse to emphasize differences, to view the “others” as distinct from ourselves, “the people.” Reflecting his general disregard for established rules and traditions, in *Ghost Dog*, Jarmusch shows no qualms about portraying just about any other ethnic group than his own (his family is reportedly of Czech/German/Irish origins).<sup>24</sup> Contrasting much of the ethnicity debate, authenticity simply is not in question. Reflecting their maker, the characters of *Ghost Dog* are not concerned with authenticity, neither. As ethnic identity is constantly evolving, it becomes increasingly difficult to trace the origin of ethnic signifiers (as Jarmusch’s own mixed origins reflect). Everything is interpretation and reinterpretation, and consequently nothing and everything is authentic.

In Jarmusch’s film, ethnic transaction resembles the process of osmosis. Ethnic boundaries are presented as illusive, unstable, and most certainly permeable. Inevitably, therefore, in a multicultural society, cultural exchange will take place. Through Asian spirituality, philosophy, and martial arts, Ghost Dog finds regeneration, not only as a victim of random violence, but, significantly, as an African American. Ghost Dog is not limited by preconceived notions of what an African American is supposed to look like, act like, read, be

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<sup>23</sup> Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Films* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>24</sup> “Biography,” *The Jim Jarmusch Resource Page*, <http://www.jim-jarmusch.net/bio/> (August 31, 2011).

inspired by, but evolves his own ethnic identity by reinterpreting cultural traditions of another ethnic group. Here it is fitting to have another look at the epigraph of this chapter: “It is bad when one thing becomes two. . . . If one understands things in this manner, he should be able to hear about all Ways and be more and more in accord with his own.” In the context of *Ghost Dog*, this means that the consenting incorporation of Asian cultural traditions into our protagonist’s own identity does not pose a threat to him as an African American, but rather enriches his ethnic identity, because he recreates the different ‘ways’ in his own image.

Cultural interaction is not restricted to *Ghost Dog*, though. As Jonathan Rosenbaum correctly points out, “all the movie’s characters are casually liberated and even defined by their capacity to drift between cultures.”<sup>25</sup> Sonny Valerio is a particularly colorful example. As one of the Italian American gangsters, he is not described as particularly inclined to multiculturalism. On the contrary, it would not be unfair to call him a racist, a view substantiated by the way he refers to *Ghost Dog* in the sit-down scene, where it is decided that *Ghost Dog* must be eliminated: “Handsome Frank was one of us, so now we’re gonna peel this nigger’s cap back!” Apparent racism aside, his choice of words is interesting for another reason. The phrase, “peel this nigger’s cap back,” sounds strange coming from a movie mobster, where for instance “whack” is a more common euphemism for having someone killed. Such lingo makes more sense, however, if we consider his fondness for gangsta rap. In the same scene, when the subject of *Ghost Dog*’s name comes up, Sonny’s face lights up as he helpfully explains that “all the rappers have got names like that for themselves: Snoop Doggy Dog, Ice Cube, Q-tip, Method Man. My favorite is Flava Flav from Public Enemy.” He even tops it off by citing some lyrics. Still, to Sonny, this is not a result of cultural transgression. Rather, it simply reveals that when it comes to music he feels that rappers express his gangster mentality better than, say Sinatra, the archetypical musical preference for movie gangsters. He takes what was originally thought of as a black music genre, an expression of African American urban life style originating in New York in the 1970s, and makes it his, an expression of his Italian American mob life.

Nonetheless, it should be added that Sonny’s approach to cultural exchange differs from *Ghost Dog*’s in one significant aspect. Keeping in mind our discussion of the complex relationship between ethnicity and race, *Ghost Dog*’s incorporation of Asian philosophies and martial arts is closely linked to race in a way that Sonny, as a white male, is freed from. As mentioned, *Ghost Dog* identifies with samurai culture because it speaks to him as an African

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, “International Sampler,” *Chicago Reader*, March 2000, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/international-sampler/Content?oid=901725> (August 30, 2011).

American. Considering the centuries of oppression that African Americans have had to endure, racism is one of the most important reasons why he transgresses cultural boundaries in the way that he does. Asian samurai culture speaks to him as a source of strength and positive identification against the yoke of oppression. Contrastingly, when Sonny identifies with hip-hop culture, he is merely expressing his *personal* identity, as a gangster. As a member of the majority racial group, he can transcend group thinking in a way inconceivable to Ghost Dog. Consequently, the characterizations of Ghost Dog and Sonny do reveal the way consent-based ethnicity opens up for interpretation and reinterpretation across ethnic and racial boundaries, but it is also an example of how difficult it is to cut race out of the ethnicity debate. Racism affects the power-balance between ethnic groups. Consequently, Sonny exploiting a cultural expression that (at least historically) has represented the struggles of a suppressed minority is, at the very least, problematic.

This problematic dialectic is further paralleled, although reversed, by the “rappers in blue,” in the park scene. Dropping lines like “black vengeance . . . multiple gun-shot wounds from nine inches . . . black mafia mind De Niro/ In my hood I’m a hero . . . trigger-happy Mafioso,” they, on the one hand, illustrate the way that individuals from such seemingly oppositional cultures interact and influence each other through interpretation and reinterpretation of each other’s cultural signifiers. This osmosis of cultural expressions points to the fact that often lines between ethnic groups are not as permanent or impenetrable as they might appear. On the other hand, though, the rappers further demonstrate the differences in approach. When Sonny cites gangsta rap, the effect is comical. However, the rappers’ portrayal of themselves as ghetto “men of honor” has a bitter taste to it, considering the gang violence and inhuman living conditions that characterize many black ghettos. Liquor bottle in hand, they become tragic figures, representatives of what institutionalized racism has done to the African American self-image.

Nonetheless, *Ghost Dog* is not all sadness and tears. The issues of cultural clashes and cultural similarity are put to comic effect in the last portion of the sit-down scene, where the mafia leaders discuss the strange names of black rappers, comparing them to Native American names, and boiling it all down to “Niggers, Indians – same thing,” only to end the conversation by calling out to one of their own to get “Sammy the Snake, Joe Rags, Big Angie.” This way, Jarmusch employs comedy to reveal the bigotry of the mobsters, as well as to show that ethnical boundaries and differences often are constructed in order to artificially and unnecessarily separate the in-group from the “others.” To cite our epigraph, “it is bad when one thing becomes two.”

That racism is still a factor is also reflected elsewhere. The most vivid example is found after Ghost Dog has eliminated most of the mobsters and is heading back to the city. By the road he spots two hunters loading up their truck with a black bear they have shot. Ghost Dog pulls over and asks them why they have killed the animal. In a Southern accent, they reply, “Because there aren’t too many of these black fuckers around.” Earlier in the film, Raymond, Ghost Dog’s Haitian friend, has already compared Ghost Dog to a bear. Consequently, the viewer cannot but read the phrase “black fuckers” as referring to African Americans. The hunters’ accent is also crucial. Jarmusch exploits the viewer’s familiarity with celluloid depictions of racism as historically a Southern problem, and is thereby able to incorporate into the viewer’s reading of the scene the entire history of oppression against African Americans. As such, it is an example of intertextuality in *Ghost Dog*, an aspect that will be discussed in detail below. Ghost Dog’s response is retaliation. He shoots and kills the hunters, as they have killed the “black fucker.”

Consequently, characterization in *Ghost Dog* paints a complex, contradictory, and at times, bewildering portrayal of American ethnicity. It describes the possibilities of cultural transaction and understanding through consent-based ethnicity as almost endless. Simultaneously, though, culture clashes and racism are depicted as equally integral parts of multicultural societies. Jarmusch chooses to depict the multiplicities of modern day American ethnicity, but refrains from drawing any definite conclusions. Instead, contradictions are presented as part of existence, and is therefore merely presented, not resolved.

## Music

The views on ethnicity portrayed through *Ghost Dog*’s characters are also reflected in both the diegetic and non-diegetic music of the film, especially the original soundtrack. The original score consists of instrumental tracks written, produced, mixed and arranged by RZA. Both the music and its maker parallel the osmotic interpretation of ethnicity that Jarmusch presents. Mirroring the protagonist, RZA’s hip-hop score is infused with a lot of Asian influences. Instead of focusing on melody, it emphasizes individual notes and tones, a feature typical of traditional Chinese and Japanese music. This also fits in nicely with the aesthetics of hip-hop sampling, where theme and variation (of that theme) is important, instead of progressive development, or melody, as in traditional European music. Furthermore, by sampling instruments typical of traditional Chinese and Japanese music (and well-known to viewers through martial art movies), such as flutes, cymbals, gongs, xylophones, and wind

chimes, RZA's work mirrors and elaborates on the mix-and-match nature of Ghost Dog's ethnic identity, by infusing Asian musical traditions in American ones, just like Ghost Dog incorporates Asian culture into his African American identity. Adhering to classical Hollywood norms to a much larger degree in *Ghost Dog* than in *Stranger than Paradise* and *Dead Man*, the music also thematically and rhythmically coalesces with editing and movement within the image. Accordingly, the tracks infused with Asian influences feature in scenes depicting Ghost Dog or his pigeons in flight (which symbolize Ghost Dog, or more specifically, the freedom he achieves by transcending cultural boundaries).

A good example of this is the sequence depicting Ghost Dog training his pigeons. It starts with a low angle medium long shot of Ghost Dog opening the pigeon coup and commanding the birds to take flight. This allows us to see the birds from below, and thereby also the endless sky, which underlines the freedom they represent. Simultaneously, a non-diegetic track consisting of xylophone and cymbals starts up. In sync with the music, cuts are made to a couple of straight-on angle medium shots of the same scene in order to rhythmically match image and sound. As the birds hit the sky, a recognizably hip-hop drumbeat joins the xylophone and cymbals. The rest of the sequence intercuts low angle long shots of the birds, as if from Ghost Dog's point of view, with low angle medium close-ups of Ghost Dog controlling the movements of his birds, thereby linking the birds to Ghost Dog, through editing and similarity of framing. Jarmusch further emphasizes the connection by superimposing shots of Ghost Dog on shots of the birds in flight (see figure 2). Also through editing, Jarmusch makes sure that the movements of the birds, and of Ghost Dog, as well as the duration of each shot (the cuts), all follow the beat of the non-diegetic music. As the sequence ends, so does the music. Thereby, through rhythmically matching image and sound, the viewer is informed of the way Asian and African American culture together has shaped Ghost Dog's identity. It becomes his theme, so to speak. Similarly, intercutting birds in flight into the mix means linking them to Ghost Dog and his consent-based ethnic identity. They therefore further strengthen the argument that the Asian influence has awarded Ghost Dog with a sense of freedom that enables him to transcend his worldly troubles.



Figure 2. *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (screenshot)

The Asian influence is the most apparent way in which music complements characterization, but it is important to keep in mind that hip-hop is in itself a result of mixing and matching cultural expressions. From inception it was an amalgam of divergent musical styles and cultures. Exactly what these cultural roots consist of is naturally contested, stretching from work songs and children's games like double Dutch to the Surinam tradition of cutsingi (mixture of folk tale and song), high oratory (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King) and bebop. However, there seems to be general agreement that the introduction by Jamaican immigrants, such as DJ Kool Herc, of what is referred to as "toasting" (making music by speaking over records) to the streets of New York City played a major role. Originating in the 1970s, in the poorer neighborhoods of New York, deejays would plug their equipment into lampposts and play records at street parties. Ethnically speaking, hip-hop in its formative years was dominated by people of African descent, but whose ancestors had been transplanted (as slaves) to very different cultures. Moreover, hip-hop has always incorporated a significant



number of Puerto Ricans and Hispanics, since they inhabited the same neighborhoods.<sup>26</sup> Still, many of non-African origins were not accepted at first, exemplified by famous Puerto Rican deejay Charlie Chase who, despite his skills, was criticized for not being fit to play hip-hop, “because to them it’s a Black thing and something that’s from their roots and shit.”<sup>27</sup>

However, Chase refused to accept that his ethnic heritage kept him from playing hip-hop, and similar to Ghost Dog adapting samurai culture to fit his own situation, instead incorporated hip-hop into his own identity, for instance by retaining his dress code, rather than conforming to the African American sense of what a hip-hopper should look like. Gradually though, especially as hip-hop spread to the West Coast and LA, Hispanics became an integral part of the genre, altering it with their own interpretation, successfully infusing it with Calo signifiers, such as slang (“homeboy”) and low-rider culture.<sup>28</sup> Today, hip-hop has of course conquered the world, exemplified by the low-rider culture extending as far as Japan, as well as white kids referring to themselves as “niggas.”<sup>29</sup>

The latter example is also another illustration of the limits of consent-based ethnicity in surpassing racial boundaries, as discussed above. The African American usage of the word represents an attempt at turning the word’s meaning on its head, by absorbing it. In other words, it is an attempt at defusing its damaging potential. Still, as loaded as the word “nigger” is, having represented institutionalized oppression for hundreds of years, its usage is still debated, even within the in-group. Therefore, when white kids incorporate its “new” meaning, as hip-hop slang, and refer to themselves as “niggas,” it is evident that the issue of race interferes with cultural interpretation and reinterpretation. Paralleling Sonny and Ghost Dog, white kids referring to themselves as “niggas” inherently invokes the word’s racist connotations, as they are representatives of the majority group that once used the word as means of oppression.

Nonetheless, demographics is not the only way in which hip-hop displays its disregard for ethnic boundaries. Even more significant to our purpose is the aesthetics of the genre. Through accident and invention, as well as technological advances, an aesthetic evolved that involved deejays/producers and emcees, and which focused on rhymes, beats, breaks, and digital sampling. The emcee, or MC (Master of Ceremonies, or mike controller), is responsible for the words, the rhymes that are rapped on top of the music. Deejays soon

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<sup>26</sup> On the roots of hip-hop, see John F. Szwed, “The Real Old School,” and S. H. Fernando Jr., “Back in the Day,” in *The Vibe History of Hip-Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 3-10, 13-21.

<sup>27</sup> Charlie Chase, quoted in Juan Flores, “Puerto Rocks: Rap, Roots, and America,” in Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Forman, eds., *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 72.

<sup>28</sup> Raegan Kelly, “Hip-Hop Chicano: A Separate but Parallel Story,” in *That’s the Joint!*, 96-97.

<sup>29</sup> Gabriel Alvarez, “Gangsta Rap in the ‘90s,” in *The Vibe History*, 286.

learned that the crowd responded particularly well to certain segments of a record, so-called “breaks,” and therefore found a way that these breaks could be isolated and repeated. By using two turntables and two identical records, thereby allowing one record to play the break, while the other is rewound, an uninterrupted flow of music could be created. Technological developments, especially the emergence of digital sampling, meant that a number of different breaks could be combined to form a “beat,” a musical collage, which of course indicates that “digital sampling” simply means to digitally sample different breaks from prerecorded music, creating new beats out of old sounds. Therefore, deejays using digital sampling are often referred to as “producers,” since digital sampling is reminiscent of the work of a music producer, who often is highly involved in the creation of a record, shaping the “raw material” of the artist(s).<sup>30</sup>

Digital sampling quickly led to mass archiving of music, as deejays acquired huge record collections, always on the search for a new break. It also led to an unusual openness to other genres and influences. Anything is potentially interesting. What is important is the break, not from where it originates. This nondiscriminatory approach has resulted in the world adopting hip-hop as its own, because, as Joseph G. Schloss states, “hip-hop – through the logic of its production – increasingly becomes the world.”<sup>31</sup> Such an approach corresponds well with *Ghost Dog*’s emphasis on consent, ethnic interaction, and interpretation and reinterpretation of ethnical expressions and traditions. Paralleling Jarmusch’s characters, his musical choices reflect a disregard for artificial cultural boundaries, and instead front the way in which a multiethnic society fosters individuals who view the most appealing traditions and expressions of other cultures as “breaks” that can be incorporated into their own “beat.” Hip-hop, like consent-based ethnicity, has an affinity for collage. Both acquire identity and expressions by reinterpreting cultural segments they find appealing.

Such a reasoning is further substantiated by the choice of RZA as musical producer. In *The Wu-Tang Manual*, he delineates his views on a wide range of subjects, from comic books to capitalism. Significantly, he also describes the intricate relationship between his music and the many cultural influences that lie behind it, especially his fascination with Asian philosophies, spirituality, and kung-fu movies. In fact, studying the *Manual*, the many parallels between RZA and Ghost Dog make RZA stand out as the real life version of the African American samurai, a point also alluded to in the film, through RZA’s appearance as

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<sup>30</sup> On the aesthetics of hip-hop, see Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 1-17, 25-43, 135-149, 195-197.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

“samurai in camouflage.” It should be mentioned, though, that the book was published in 2005, six years after the release of the film, which of course makes the conclusion possible that RZA has been influenced by his involvement in the movie, and not the other way around. However, RZA and the Wu-Tang Clan’s interest in Asian philosophies and kung-fu movies has been well known at least since the release of their debut album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, in 1993, which title derives from the kung-fu movie *The 36<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Shaolin* (1978). The name Wu-Tang of course also points to this interest. There is, however, also the possibility with a text like *The Wu-Tang Manual* that it is written merely to perpetuate and support the myth associated with the group, but my point is that it is exactly this myth that Jarmusch exploits by incorporating RZA’s music. RZA’s involvement means that it is not only the actual music that colors the film, but also the man behind the music, or if you will, the myth behind the music. Consequently, whether or not the *Manual* speaks the truth about RZA becomes irrelevant to my purpose. The point is that the inclusion of RZA’s music in the film is another example of the many intertextual references in *Ghost Dog*. *The Wu-Tang Manual* is therefore valuable as a text, fictional or not, that Jarmusch’s film refers to by association.

According to the *Manual*, RZA’s path began as a child, growing up in Staten Island, New York, with an interest in kung-fu movies. This interest led to a quest for knowledge on the subject, including trips to Chinatown in search of books. Mirroring *Ghost Dog*, it was the idea of self-discipline and the possibility of recreating yourself that appealed to him. In other words, RZA, like *Ghost Dog*, found strength in a culture and tradition not his own. His explanation as to why he identified with kung-fu movies is simple: “Listen, we’re oppressed.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, RZA is a living example of the way the issue of race affects consent-based ethnicity, as discussed above. Reflecting the film version of himself, he reinterprets the films to fit his particular situation, and incorporates foreign cultural features to better express his own. Moreover, the name of the group, *Wu-Tang Clan*, is taken from a film called *Shaolin and Wu Tang* (1981), which tells the story of two competing schools of martial arts, where the original teachings of Shaolin are contested by the rebellious Wu Tang. This film also gave him the idea of renaming Staten Island Shaolin, because he “realized that Shaolin was the foundation of Wu-Tang. Shaolin is your mind and Wu-Tang is your body. You could be Wu-Tang, and Shaolin is where you come from. That’s why I named Staten Island Shaolin. We are Wu-Tang and we come from Shaolin.”<sup>33</sup> In very literal terms,

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<sup>32</sup> RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual* (New York: Riverhead Freestyle, 2005), 62.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

therefore, RZA recreates his cultural identity, and even past, complementing his African American descent by refashioning it in Asian traditions, mirroring his celluloid alter ego, Ghost Dog.

## Intertextuality

The term “intertextuality” was first coined by Julia Kristeva, in the late 1960s, in her rewriting of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas as a Russian formalist. Leon S. Roudiez, editor of the translation, paraphrases her definition of intertextualism as “transposition of one or more systems of signs (such as the novel) into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position. Any signifying practice is a field . . . in which various signifying systems undergo such a transposition.”<sup>34</sup> Text in this sense is understood as a semiological system. In the words of Barthes: “All signifying practices can engender text: the practice of painting pictures, musical practice, filmic practice, etc.”<sup>35</sup> Consequently, *Ghost Dog* can be analyzed as a text that interacts with and reinterprets other texts.

The aforementioned examples of intertextuality are not the only ones in *Ghost Dog*, far from it. In fact, all of Jarmusch’s films are full of intertextual references. *Ghost Dog*, *Dead Man*, and *Stranger than Paradise* all use intertextuality as a way of stressing as well as complicating thematic concerns. Moreover, intertextuality is one of the most important ways in which Jarmusch communicates opposition against the powers that be, as well as aligns himself with the rebels and freethinkers. For instance, in *Dead Man*, the works of William Blake, and the poet himself, inform our understanding of the film’s views on the Western myth. Similarly, *Stranger than Paradise* refers to the films of Yasujiro Ozu as a way of explaining both the film’s own structural and technical choices, and as a protest against the contemporary sociopolitical context of Reaganism.

Still, in no Jarmusch film does intertextuality play as significant a role as it does in *Ghost Dog*. The sheer prevalence of allusions alone speaks to this fact, but the great variety is also worth noticing, stretching from references to novels, short stories, and films, to music, film genres, and sociology. Such multiplicity of intertextual allusions consequently reflects the film’s thematic agenda, as “the very concept of intertextuality means that no text is an

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<sup>34</sup> Leon S. Roudiez, introduction to Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 15.

<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, “Theory of the Text,” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 33.

untouched, unified whole.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the very fact that intertextual references are given such a prominent place in *Ghost Dog*, reflect the mix-and-match aspect of consent-based ethnicity, because all texts are products of interaction and exchange, interpretation and reinterpretation. Acknowledging and displaying intertextuality in such an obvious and unabashed manner, as Jarmusch does in *Ghost Dog*, testifies to his openness to cultural influences. Just as no text is an “untouched, unified whole,” no ethnic group is a separate, distinct entity. As we shall see, this aspect is also reflected in the individual references.

The most striking aspect of *Ghost Dog*’s approach to intertextuality is the explicit and self-conscious manner in which the references are presented. Allusions to literature, for instance, are on numerous occasions made by quite literally putting the actual work (a copy of the book) on display, in front of the camera (see figure 3). Such an approach is simultaneously narcissistic and egalitarian, in that the film both seeks to heighten (by association) its critical status, by placing itself in the company of highly revered texts and authors, while the display of titles also makes sure that all viewers pick up on the references (as long as they are familiar with the texts presented). Adding to the latter effect is the indiscriminate coupling of so-called “high” and “low-culture,” references ranging from Miguel de Cervantes to the pulp fiction novel *Night Nurse*. Consequently, this aspect also links Jarmusch’s use of intertextuality to hip-hop, which similarly is open to all types of artistic productions, as described above.

The explicit intertextual references are essentially displayed in five different ways. These are *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, the collection of short stories, *Rashomon*, American cartoons, the books in Louise’s lunchbox, and the writers, musicians, and filmmakers listed under “Personal Thanks” in the end credits. At center is *Hagakure*. It forms the framework of the film through the fifteen quotes displayed on the screen. The citations add coherence between individual plot lines, as well as structure, by sectioning the work. Furthermore, the content of the excerpts complement the action by mirroring, foreshadowing, or commenting upon events. Finally, and most important to our approach, they function as message boards, where Jarmusch can convey different layers of meaning. Take for instance the fourteenth citation:

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<sup>36</sup> Elaine D. Cancalon and Antoine Spacagna, eds., introduction to *Intertextuality in Literature and Film: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Annual Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 1.

It is said that what is called “the spirit of an age” is something to which one cannot return. That this spirit gradually dissipates is due to the world’s coming to an end. For this reason, although one would like to change today’s world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago, it cannot be done. Thus it is important to make the best out of every generation.

The excerpt encapsulates the way the citations function on several levels. First, it foreshadows and explains the succeeding and final scenes of the narrative. In the light of this quote we see what transpires next – the death of Ghost Dog, that he passes *Hagakure* on to Pearlman, as well as the introduction of Louise as the new mafia boss – as the new generation carrying on the torch. Throughout the plot, especially Louie has been lamenting that everything is changing, that nothing stays the same. The fourteenth citation explains that, whether one likes it or not, change is inevitable and continuous. Resistance is accordingly futile, and all one can do is to “make the best out of every generation.” Second, through intertextuality, the cultural context in which *Ghost Dog* places itself by referring to *Hagakure*, we become aware of a more implicit meaning of the quote. The fact that this excerpt is taken from a book written in the eighteenth century complements the first meaning. The presence of an apocalyptic tone (“the world’s coming to an end”), and the fact that the eighteenth century narrator speaks of wanting to “change today’s world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago,” reminds us that the process of change, and the fear of it, is not a modern phenomenon. Rather, change is ever-present, continuous, and inevitable. Moreover, since it is natural, and has always existed and will always exist, *Ghost Dog* argues that perhaps our fear is exaggerated. The “apocalyptic” parallel, the argument that every generation thinks it is the last, in other words, fears change, is also reflected elsewhere in the film, such as in the scene where Ghost Dog and Raymond watch a Hispanic person build a boat on top of his inner-city building, an allusion to the biblical Noah and his Ark. This last aspect furthermore points to a third layer of meaning, the symptomatic meaning, that is, the social viewpoints of the film. On this level the function of the excerpt is to reiterate the assertion that ethnicity is a concept which content is constantly changing. Change in ethnic demographics, interaction, interpretation and reinterpretation cannot be reversed, stopped, or even controlled, and consequently all we can do is to make the best out of the current situation, or as Hagakure puts it, “the best out of every generation.”

The second reference, the book *Rashomon*, is also a motif, recurring throughout the movie, as it is passed from one character to another, from its first appearance in Handsome

Frank's house, in the possession of Louise Vargo. She lends it to Ghost Dog, who passes it on to Pearline, before it via Ghost Dog and Louie completes the circle and is returned to Louise in one of the final scenes. Aside from the fact that it is further testimony to the influence of samurai culture in Ghost Dog's life, its significance in *Ghost Dog* primarily derives from the film adaptation by Akira Kurosawa. The film *Rashomon* (1950) is based on two short stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa: "Rashomon" (1915) and "In a Grove" (1922), or, "Yabu No Naka," as it is referred to in *Ghost Dog*. Significantly, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* draws its plot from "Yabu No Naka." Consequently, when it is referred to (as Ghost Dog and Pearline's favorite) as one of the short stories of the collection *Rashomon*, the viewer recognize it from Kurosawa's adaptation, which is far better known to a western audience than the work of Akutagawa. As delineated in *Ghost Dog*, "Yabu No Naka" tells the story of a murder of a samurai through witness' accountants. Significantly, the various renditions simultaneously compliment and contradict each other. However, *Rashomon* is not first and foremost a detective story where the point is to decipher which characters are telling the truth and which are lying. Rather, the message is that human experience is never objective, and that contradictions and multiple stories are part of our world. As an intertextual element in *Ghost Dog*, this transfers to the relativity and flexibility of consent-based ethnicity. It illuminates Jarmusch's rejection of any Big Truth. It speaks to the search for identity, and to the resulting eclecticism and fluidity of American ethnicity. As expressions are individual, and constantly changing, it is impossible to pinpoint what comprises the ethnicity of a specific group. (The postmodern rejection of any Big Truth/Grand Narrative will be dealt with in more detail in my chapter on *Dead Man*).

Another structural element is the American cartoons the mobsters are always watching. Their function is comparable to that of *Hagakure*. They, too, foreshadow, reiterate, and complement the narrative. Combined, novel and cartoons are also representatives of Jarmusch's disregard for cultural hierarchies. Whereas *Hagakure* represents high culture (as an eighteenth century Japanese novel), the cartoons, especially American cartoons, shown on television, epitomize popular culture. By awarding them parallel functions, Jarmusch points to the flawed logic of creating artificial cultural boundaries. As with hip-hop, and consent-based ethnicity, function triumphs origin. A good example of this is found in the final sequences. Having seemingly won the war (as the only two survivors), Louie and the new head of the family, Louise, are in a limousine after the final shoot-out. After dialogue shots of Louie and Louise, a cut is made to a shot of a television set in the car showing a cartoon. In what appears to be an Itchy and Scratchy cartoon, the cat and mouse draw ever-bigger guns on each other

until their weaponry outgrows the earth. Finally, the mouse pulls the trigger and shoots the cat flying into the sun, at which point Louise leans into the frame and turns it off.

Incorporated within the final sequences of the film, the cartoon paints a pretty grim picture of the future, or rather, potential future, of multicultural America. The preceding scenes have already established Louise as the new mob boss. Following a sequence showing Pearline and Raymond despairing over Ghost Dog's dead body, the film's ending reveals that Ghost Dog has an heir, too. The final sequence features a shot of Pearline sitting in her mother's kitchen, reading a book. Technically and structurally paralleling the opening sequences of the film (delineated above), the camera zooms in on the book she is reading. As in the opening, the title reads *Hagakure* (Ghost Dog gave her his copy right before the final shoot out scene). As Pearline thoughtfully gazes up from the book, a shot of Ghost Dog sitting on a bench in the park (where they first met) is very briefly superimposed on the shot of Pearline. Again reiterating the opening, Pearline turns to her book and reads to herself (in voice-over) a quote from *Hagakure*, which simultaneously is superimposed in white letters on the shot of her reading. The parallel is further strengthened by complementing the images with the same music as in the opening: non-diegetic wind chimes. Thereby, almost to the letter, the film ends as it began, only Pearline has taken Ghost Dog's place. In quite literal terms, therefore, Pearline is identified as Ghost Dog's successor. Consequently, by injecting the Itchy and Scratchy cartoon in between the scenes showing Louise and Pearline picking up the torch, the implication is that culture clashes is a continuing and perhaps inevitable phenomenon. Warningly, it also points to the danger of emphasizing ethnic boundaries, of cultivating an "us" vs. "them" mentality. However, keeping in mind our discussion of race and ethnicity, Jarmusch is hesitant about drawing any definite conclusions.

The fourth case of intertextuality is actually a group of references, a set of books Pearline carries in her lunchbox. Man does not live on bread alone, and Pearline has quite literally filled her lunchbox with nourishment for the soul. To our approach, the eclectic mix of her lunchbox bear more relevance than the individual references. Stretching from African American sociology to children's books and science fiction, the lunchbox further underlines the mix-and-match, truly multicultural society that Jarmusch establishes in *Ghost Dog*. Nonetheless, some of the titles do inform our understanding, such as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The intertextual allusion to Frankenstein's monster points to the fears and anxieties that consent-based ethnicity might provoke. As mentioned, one of the motifs of *Ghost Dog* is that change is continuous and inevitable. However, people are generally more comfortable with stable, clearly defined



entities, which explains why artificial boundaries are often constructed, and emphasized. Consequently, the very instability of consent-based ethnicity can create uncertainty and fears. Just like Frankenstein's monster is created from bits and pieces, *Ghost Dog's* ethnic identity is made up of cultural samples and therefore invokes unease. It defies our understanding of ethnic identity as something inherited, and therefore natural (descent-based ethnicity). The "cameo" appearance of *Dead Man* character Nobody also supports such a reading. In *Dead Man*, Nobody becomes an outcast, first due to the unfavorable union of his parents, then because he is "contaminated" by Western culture, after having spent time in England as a captive. Consequently, Nobody's appearance in *Ghost Dog* constitutes reference to another multicultural mongrel. Moreover, it is example of intertextual reference to Jarmusch's own films, and as such, a rather explicit demonstration of the dialogue that exists between his own works.

The final example of intertextuality is found in the end credits, under "Personal Thanks." It is an obvious homage to a motley crew of writers, filmmakers and hip-hoppers, many of who are not alive to appreciate the honor, such as Miguel de Cervantes, reinforcing the casual and unabashed manner in which the film puts itself in an artistic and sociohistorical context.

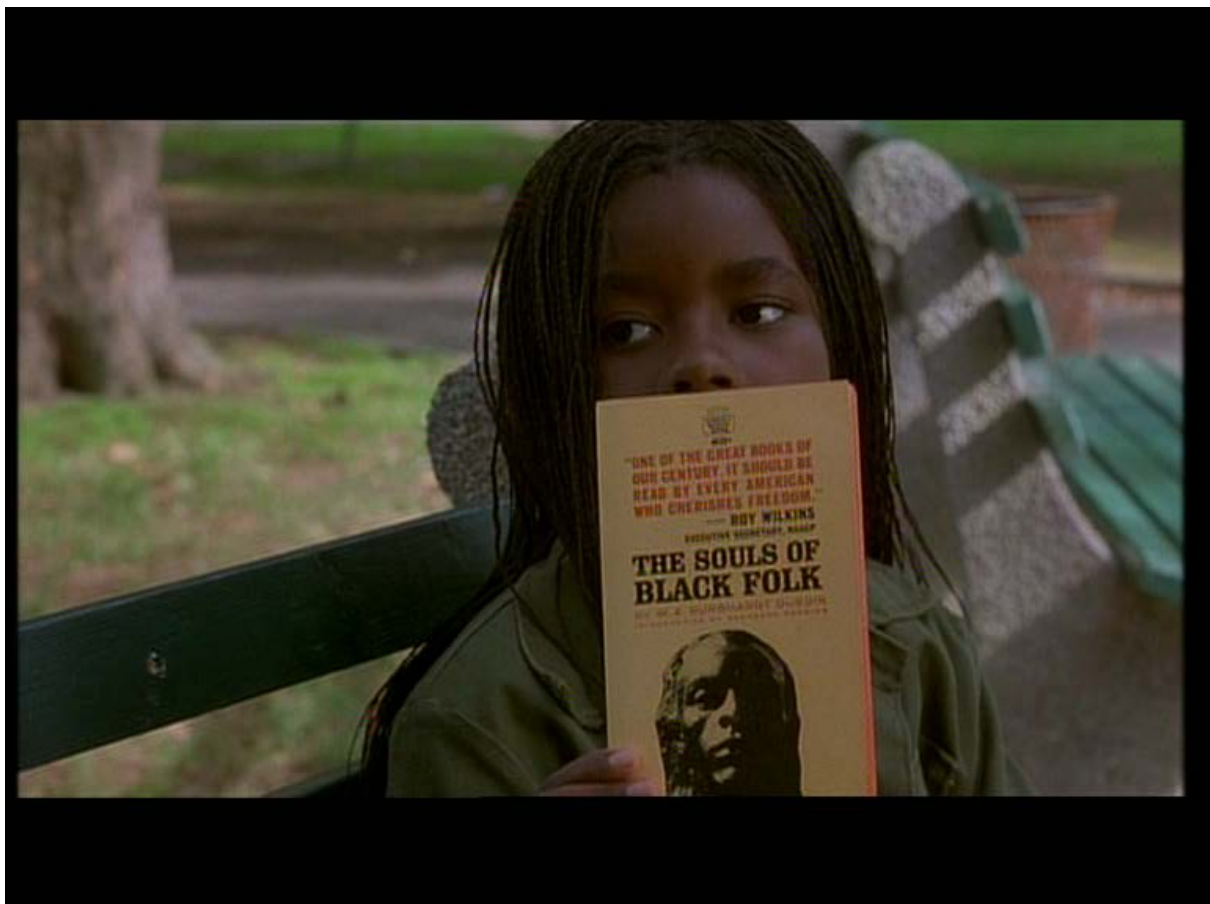


Figure 3. *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (screenshot)

Such direct, explicit allusions to other texts also function to emphasize the artificiality of Jarmusch's own work, the fact that it is a creation. By continually referring to other texts, the film lifts the viewer out of the illusory experience that what is happening in front of the camera is "real." Such devaluation of narrative induces the viewer to look for meaning in other aspects of the film, such as mise-en scene, props, or cinematography. In other words, plot and story are devaluated in favor of metaphorical meanings. In a circular motion the result is that the texts alluded to actually contribute to their own significance, as bearers of their own meanings. For instance, by displaying *The Souls of Black Folk* as one of the books in Pearline's lunchbox, *Ghost Dog* places itself, by implication, in the sociological context of the African American experience and struggle for equal rights (see figure 3). Applying Kristeva's terms to Jarmusch's film, the allusion opens up a dialogue between the filmmaker, the viewer, and the "contemporary or earlier cultural context."<sup>37</sup> It is not only the work itself that is referred to, it is the entire cultural context in which it was written and which it describes that is reinterpreted. In the aforementioned example it is not even necessary to know the content of the book. Merely by referring to the title, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in one brief shot, Jarmusch has by association incorporated the entire sociological and literary experience of African Americans (as understood by the viewer, of course) into the viewer's reading of the film.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Israel Zangwill's play, *The Melting Pot* (1908), popularized the idea that America was creating a new, homogenous race out of the many peoples of the world. Roughly half a century later, cultural, sociological, and political changes spawned a newfound appreciation of ethnicity - encapsulated by multiculturalism and the salad bowl theory - which maintained that America had failed at eradicating ethnic differences, and that the ethnic multitude was something to be celebrated, not fought. However, as mentioned in our introduction to this chapter, by the time of *Ghost Dog*'s release - the final year of the twentieth century - it had become evident that neither theory could explain the intricate complexities of contemporary American ethnicity. In fact, since the mid-1980s, Sollors and other scholars had argued that ethnicity was not vanishing, nor could it be catalogued into separate, neatly defined ethnic groups.

*Ghost Dog* is consequently important as one of very few films depicting these changes in perception. While doing my research on ethnicity in cinema, I was struck by how little I could find that deals with American ethnicity as a whole. Contrastingly, just about any conceivable

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<sup>37</sup> Kristeva, 65.

ethnic group has a veritable catalogue of books and articles, reflecting that multiculturalism and the salad bowl theory are still wielding influence in the academic field of film studies. *Ghost Dog*, on the other hand, is more concerned with debating American ethnicity in general. Channeling Sollors findings, Jarmusch's vision argues that a multicultural society such as America is inevitably characterized by the concept of consent. Through interaction, valuable ethnic signifiers of all groups are in an endless process of exchange interpreted and reinterpreted by other groups and individuals. All aspects of *Ghost Dog* discussed above – characterization, music, and intertextuality – support and complement the mix-and-match approach to ethnicity that the concept of consent represents.

Simultaneously, though, the aspect of race interferes with and problematizes the hopeful promise of consent-based ethnicity throughout the film, and regarding all aspects investigated, and is never completely resolved. However, Jarmusch's ambiguity and reluctance at drawing any definite conclusions should not be regarded as inconsistency. Where the melting pot and salad bowl theories fall short in portraying American ethnicity is in their attempt at describing society as it should be, rather than as it is. Consequently, the contradictions in *Ghost Dog* are better viewed as two sides of a coin. To present only one side might be convenient, but it conceals as much as it reveals. In other words, in the (largely) two-dimensional world of cinematic portrayals of contemporary American ethnicity, Jarmusch's vision stands out as one of the few three-dimensional ventures.

### Chapter 3. The Western Myth in *Dead Man*

Doing away with dialectics and diversity, myth flattens, simplifies, and clarifies the world. . . . Myth creates a depoliticized and sanitized reality. . . . In this way, myth is not devoid of history, but, rather, of histories. Myth is history that suppresses, distorts, and masquerades as the 'whole story.'

Melinda Szaloky<sup>38</sup>

*Dead Man* is something as un-Jarmuschian as a western. However, the train ride that constitutes its introductory sequences (before opening credits) makes it clear from the start that this will be a western tale out of the ordinary. The sequences are pieced together of shots of the train and its machinery, and shots of the interior of a passenger car - including what we identify as the protagonist and his fellow passengers - intercut with shots of the landscape the train plows through. Admittedly, superficially described, it sounds like the opening of any classic western. This is because the real difference in Jarmusch's portrayal lies not in the selection of material, but in how that material is presented, which is also indicative of the film as a whole. Consequently the train is not portrayed as a majestic iron horse, bringing civilization to the wilderness. Rather, exterior, low straight-on angle shots of the train (as seen from the rails) as well as close-ups of the machinery, its wheels and pistons, depict it as a dangerously uncontrollable industrial menace that relentlessly forces its way westward (see figure 4).

Neither the scenery is portrayed with the same deference we have come to expect from this genre. In keeping with the cramped, almost claustrophobic sensation of the *mise-en-scène* throughout the film, most landscape shots are of dense forests, rather than vast, open spaces. Even more important, all shots of scenery are presented as seen from within the carriage, through the perspective of the protagonist, a checker-suited Bill Blake. Jarmusch does include the traditional widescreen images of staple western landscape, such as desert rock formations and prairie, but the widescreen effect is achieved by adding black masks to the top and bottom of the frames, as if seen through the wooden blinds of the car. As a result, these POV shots also give the sensation of being behind bars, further adding to the overall premonition that Blake is, in the words of the train's soot-blackened fireman, "just as likely to find [his] own grave." Moreover, the landscape looks deserted, rather than untouched, more threatening than majestic, and is furthermore blemished with burnt-out wagons and tipis. Further adding to the

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<sup>38</sup> Melinda Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell: The Return of a Repressed Western History in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*," in *Westerns: Film through History*, ed. Janet Walker (New York: Routledge, 2001), 50.

feeling of doom is the eerie guitar music that accompanies the images, not forgetting the ominous speech offered to Blake by the aforementioned fireman, who functions as gatekeeper to Hell (which is what he calls Blake's destination) and whose speech foreshadows the ending of both Blake and the film.

Equally disconcerting to Bill Blake are the passengers of the car. Most of the opening scenes are punctuated by black fades, which regarding the Blake POV shots function as marking time lapses, indicating that Blake has dozed off. Each time he wakes up the demographics of his fellow travelers has changed. For the worse, according to Blake's reactions. Jarmusch uses costume and appearance to indicate how far into the wilderness the train has ventured, i.e. how far west, by having the passengers become more and more uncivilized in appearance (and manner, eventually). At first the majority is dressed like Bill Blake, in city attire, and quite a few of them are women and children, amicable, smiling women, even. Gradually, though, these passengers are replaced by bearded, beady-eyed, scowling hunters and trappers, dressed in fur and leather from top to toe, clutching rifles, which they in the final scenes (before opening credits) for apparently no good reason unload on a herd of buffaloes the train passes.

A final point about the unconventionality of the opening sequences should be made about the style, which is very dissimilar from that of the classic western. The film western inherited much of its emphasis on action from so-called "dime novels." In contrast, the first scenes of *Dead Man* trudge along at an almost meditative pace. The pace is admittedly faster than in Jarmusch's earlier films, such as *Stranger than Paradise*, meaning that the cuts are more frequent, and intercut from several different scenes, but, apart from the shots of the machinery, the entire sequence is constructed from our protagonist's point of view. Establishing shots are followed by POV shots showing us what Blake sees. In other words, contrary to Hollywood doctrine, Jarmusch allows us to experience the train ride as Bill Blake experiences it. Accordingly, many of the shots are by classical Hollywood standard, and that of the western, pretty mundane, in the sense that they focus on events irrelevant to the cause-effect chain of the narrative, such as shots of Blake reading a pamphlet about beekeeping, watching his fellow passengers, watching a lamp in the ceiling, and so on. Moreover, the scenes contain almost no dialogue. In fact, not a single word is uttered during the first five and a half minutes, when the surreal monologue of the fireman breaks the silence.

Such an opening is in many ways representative of the entire film. Although *Dead Man* is not filled with plot-oriented action, it is nonetheless saturated with meaning. It is a western, but determining what type of western it is, is not important, although many film critics and

scholars seem to think otherwise, variably classifying it as “acid western,” “ironic western,” or “revisionist western.”<sup>39</sup> The point is; *Dead Man* is first and foremost a revisionist *film*. By this I mean that Jarmusch is not primarily concerned with revising the western as genre, but merely uses it as canvas because it suits his agenda. This agenda is no less than to debate the very soul of America, by discussing its past. As we shall see, although the power center has always been the east, the western experience has historically been the most fundamental for American self-perception, and the frontier has been its most central theme. Therefore, it is not unnatural that in the world of cinema the western has traditionally been the forum for discussions about the history and identity of America. Consequently, when Jarmusch exploits the myths and conventions of the western, he is essentially not comparing and contrasting them to his own interpretation of the genre, but to his own vision of America.



Figure 4. *Dead Man* (screenshot)

### Innocence and Experience

The history of the western is as old as American cinema itself (*The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is usually cited as the first film western), but the origins of the genre, concerning its aesthetics, themes, and the myths it has purported, can be traced at least a hundred years further back. The celluloid western is namely in many ways a continuation of western art and

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<sup>39</sup> For example, see Suarez, 104-105; Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Dead Man* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 49-51, and Gregg Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure: *Dead Man*," *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 390.

literature that evolved during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, following the Louisiana Purchase. Consequently, by the time the myths and histories of the western were portrayed on screen, they had already been imprinted in the American mind for a century through the words and images of western visual art and popular literature. In other words, through reinterpretation, reinvention, and repetition this creative construction was interpreted as historicity because it was constantly being repeated, thereby affirming its own validity.

The traces of the western myths are evident already in the first travel accounts from the beginning of the eighteenth century. The journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition (1803-1806) portray the landscape and nature of the West as unspoiled, as pure, as essentially Edenic. This view of the West as innocent is also found in successive reports of other travelers such as Thomas Nuttall and Washington Irving. The romanticism of the period fitted well with the discovery of what was perceived as new, untouched land. In the words of Thomas J. Lyon, “the West was born, literarily, as romantic territory.”<sup>40</sup> This approach was not entirely unjustified. At the time, much of the West was uninhabited, or at least uncultivated land, and the majestic scenery must have been interpreted as an affirmation of American exceptionalism, that it after all was a beacon upon a hill, full of youthful promise and potential. This view would go largely unchallenged until the latter half of the century, when industrial and population expansion eventually stripped the West of most of its wildness. Mark Twain’s classic *Roughing It* (1872) is among the cultural representatives of these social changes. This work belongs to the “postfrontier” section of western literature, to borrow Lyon’s term, that already at this point was able to confront, analyze and problematize cultural assumptions about the frontier and expansionism.<sup>41</sup>

However, from the 1860s onwards, a parallel, more forceful trend, spearheaded by mass-produced “dime novels,” would carry on the romantic view of the West as innocent, ignoring the increasingly discernable discrepancies between reality and fiction. A fascinating aspect of the dime novel is that even in its inception it expressed a nostalgic view of the West, even though it at that time supposedly depicted contemporary society. Perhaps this is why these myths have proven so resilient, as indicated by the popularity and longevity of the dime novel, and its cinematic equivalent, the classic western. Such a nostalgic view of ideals deemed to be representative of the West, or even America, means that these ideals were (and are) regarded as simultaneously relevant and in constant danger of disappearing. Although the

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas J. Lyon, “The Literary West,” in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 709.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 708.

U.S. Census Bureau did not officially declare the end of the frontier until 1890, it was already in the 1860s obvious that the way of life the dime novels glorified was gradually disappearing. Consequently, the present gained a sense of already being past, which gave further impetus to present the West (America) as it *should* be, rather than the way it was. If the conceived spirit of America was slipping through the hands of time, it would be natural attempting preserving it, by insisting on its well-being. Therefore, the characteristics of the classic film western are strikingly similar to the characteristics established by the dime novel, meaning that its conservative purpose has been largely successful.<sup>42</sup>

Contrasting the classic film western, *Dead Man* is more a cinematic reflection of postfrontier literature than of the dime novel. Jarmusch rejects any clear dichotomy between innocence and experience, wilderness and civilization. In fact, it is difficult to find anything Edenic or innocent about *Dead Man*'s vision of the frontier at all. The train fireman's summation of the frontier as "Hell" is as good a description as any. It is a dark, corrupt, violent, inhuman place, and civilization and industrialization, so-called progress, promises no hope of redemption. In typical postmodern fashion, civilization and wilderness, innocence and experience, blend into each other, and it is hard to separate between good and evil.

Our protagonist, Bill Blake, is a good example. In the classic western the hero usually goes through some form of catharsis that transforms him from a state of experience to a state of innocence, in the sense that he is morally rejuvenated. The implication is, similar to Turner's frontier thesis, that the untouched condition of the land affects the frontiersman in such a way that he too is made innocent, that he is essentially born again. In *Dead Man*, Bill Blake experiences no such catharsis, although he is transformed by his journey. In a reversal of the classical formula, Bill goes from innocent to experienced. In the beginning of the film, on the train and in the city of Machine, he is portrayed as an affable, somewhat effeminate, urban gentleman, conveyed through mannerisms, wardrobe, and plot. In his checkered suit, top hat, bowtie, and glasses, he is reminiscent of a Buster Keaton character, likable, but child-like. This impression is strengthened by his initial reactions to his increasingly threatening environment. The change in passenger demographics makes him clutch his bag and he reacts to the gunfire of the fur-clad passengers shooting buffalo with fright and astonishment, jumping in his seat. Similarly, he accepts his decline at Dickinson Metalworks with quiet resignation, and goes out of his way to not get in the way of anyone else.

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<sup>42</sup> On the roots of the film western in Western art, see Brian W. Dippie, "The Visual West," and Lyon, in *The Oxford History of the American West*, 675-699, 707-716.



Gradually, though, his frontier experience - his decline into the state of experience, starting with his meeting with the former prostitute Thel and the killing of her former lover Charlie - transforms him into a stone-cold killer. This transformation is of course revealed by his actions, but it is also reflected in his change of appearance. As the end approaches, he is looking more and more like an amalgam of his impressions, sporting a fur coat and a stubble, as well as Indian-style war paint in his face, painted in the blood of a dead fawn. Complementing these alterations, he goes from meeting insults with stuttering excuses to casually adding punch-lines to his killings, such as "Do you know my poetry?" and "Here's my autograph." We realize that the transformation is complete when his response to the trading post salesman's curse, "God damn your soul to the fires of Hell," is "He already has," which also confirms the train fireman's prediction that the frontier is not heaven on earth, but its very opposite.

Jarmusch's interpretation of western expansionism as brutalizing, rather than purifying the American, is not limited to the character of Bill Blake. Virtually every character in *Dead Man*, excluding perhaps Thel and Nobody, is portrayed in derogatory terms. Describing them as bigoted, corrupt, degenerate, malevolent, selfish, violent, vicious, et cetera, would not be exaggerating. Moreover, all social and work groups represented are depicted in similarly unflattering ways. Again, the way Jarmusch relates to the classic western is to make use of the framework established by the genre, while inverting its content. Therefore, on the surface, *Dead Man* features staple characters and social groups, but depicts them as corrupted by the frontier, rather than purified. For example, the cigar-smoking, gun-wielding, aptly named capitalist, Dick Dickinson, is a ruthless oligarch in a community ruled by money and violence, more concerned with his horse than his son, and in typically practical capitalist manner employs all means (marshals, gun-men, wanted posters) to catch Blake, dead or alive. Furthermore, the trading post missionary Bill and Nobody encounters is a bigot who sells infected blankets to the local Indian tribes, calling them "heathens and Philistines," praying that they may be purged from the earth. He also mixes God and violence, bragging to Blake that the ammunition he sells has been blessed by the Archbishop of Detroit. The missionary scene is also a good example of the way Jarmusch uses props to convey meaning. The entrance of the missionary post has a sign that says, "Work out your own salvation,"

indicating that Blake has indeed entered Godforsaken territory, where the Turnerian virtue of individualism is reduced to limitless egotism, where not even religion gives a damn.<sup>43</sup>

Even family is perverted in Jarmusch's vision of the frontier. In a memorable scene, Blake and Nobody encounters a "family" huddled around a fire for dinner in the woods. "Family" is in quotation marks because of its somewhat unusual composition; it consists of three men roughly the same age. The group dynamic is conveyed as that of a family by having the crossdressing "mother" cooking beans, which the "son" refuses to eat, which again provokes a scolding by the "father." Upon seeing Blake, first they quarrel about who gets to "have" him, then decides that he should rather be killed, at which point Nobody appears and kills them all (excluding Bill, of course). Moreover, *Dead Man* even manages to further vilify the villains of the classic western. The gunmen of *Dead Man* are not only bad guys, but degenerate, murderous psychopaths who kill completely without warning or reason. Cole Wilson is the ultimate example, a cannibal who ends up killing, cooking, and eating fellow gunman Conway Twill, and who (supposedly) has also raped and devoured his parents.

Nothing is sacred in *Dead Man*, not even nature. The film paints such a hellish picture of the frontier that it is almost as if the land itself is cursed, rather than being "God's country." As touched upon in our outline of the opening sequences, such emphasis is put on mise-en-scène in general, and scenery in particular, that the landscape becomes a character of its own. Apart from the opening and final scenes, in Jarmusch's western there are no long shots of grand scenery, or open, vast spaces. Most of the scenes feature medium shots or various close-ups, resulting in an almost claustrophobic feeling of cramped space, although the plot predominantly takes place outside. This sensation is further enhanced by the limited selection of scenery. Again apart from the long shot of the sea at the end, and the shots of the monument valley and prairie in the beginning, the characters journey through forestry. Thus, the frontier of *Dead Man* comes across not as magnificent, abundant, innocent land, but as cramped, claustrophobic space, increasing the threat posed by the all-pervasive violence, because there is no "safety valve," as the "free" land of the Turnerian frontier often has been called.

That nature is contaminated by western expansion is further alluded to by the cinematographic emphasis of certain props. A particularly effective example reveals how Jarmusch manages to convey a large amount of meaning in a single shot. A close-up of a

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<sup>43</sup> On the Turnerian frontier, see Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and Other Essays*, with commentary by John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 31-60.

sewing machine, lying seemingly misplaced on the ground in the Makah village, as if it grew out of the ground, communicates on at least three levels as to the lack of frontier innocence. First, it is an object representative of nineteenth century industrialization, lying displaced in nature, thereby alluding to the ecological threat that industrialization, or “progress” has posed and poses to the environment. Second, the placement of the object is also in an Indian village, thereby connecting the injustices done to Native Americans to the westward expansion of “civilization.” And third, by combining the two meanings, it comments on the present (the 1990s) by alluding to expansionism of our own time; global capitalism. The same problems that the westward expansion caused, the environmental threat and the displacement of cultures, have now become global issues.

Significantly, the innocence/experience aspect is in *Dead Man* also expressed through intertextualism. The many references and allusions made to the work and persona of William Blake (1757-1827) make it evident that the poet, painter and printmaker plays a significant part in Jarmusch’s vision. The most obvious allusion is of course the physical embodiment of William Blake in the character of Bill Blake. Some critics argue that this might mean that Bill Blake is William Blake reincarnate, that Nobody’s mix-up of identities is in fact the correct interpretation. Regardless, the real importance is found in the effect of such a stylistic choice. By naming the protagonist Bill (short for William) Blake, and by explicitly addressing this link (through Nobody’s confusion), the viewer is constantly reminded of the intertextual presence of the artist and his work. It is therefore quite evident that the namesake of our protagonist has not received such a prominent place by chance.

One of the areas the incorporation of William Blake illuminates is the relationship between innocence and experience. Inspired by Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) (an edition of which he also illustrated), Blake was intrigued by the complex relationship between the human conditions of innocence and experience, for instance represented in the collection of poems, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* (1789-1794). Seen from the perspective of *Dead Man*, the most interesting aspect of *Innocence and Experience* is found by reading the two books in relation. *Songs of Innocence*, first published separately in 1789, grew out of eighteenth century understandings of childhood as basically innocent, at peace with God and nature, but vulnerable to experience, to adulthood. However, *Songs of Innocence* does not idealize the state of innocence to the extent usual at the time. Even in *Innocence* experience intrudes the idyll of childhood in the shape of contemporary social issues, such as chimneysweepers and charity school children. This is

because, to William Blake, “[innocence and experience] do not negate each other: like the two sides of the same coin, neither exists (except as a conceptual abstraction) without the other.”<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, *Songs of Experience* deals with the inevitable corruption of innocence by the experiences of the world, or adulthood, but also reflect the necessity of experience: “Just as Blake’s innocence is not heaven, or even Eden, his state of experience is not hell. Both are visions of our own world seen from fundamentally different yet interconnected perspectives.”<sup>45</sup> Thereby, the work of William Blake illuminates our understanding of the frontier in *Dead Man* by pointing to the dualistic, interdependent aspect of innocence and experience. As shown, not much about Jarmusch’s frontier is innocent. Still William Blake complicates the film’s argument by stating that, not only was the western experience not innocent, the loss of innocence was actually inevitable. Focusing on the frontier (meaning the history of America, and, essentially, its identity) as innocent, in other words, focusing on the nostalgia of what is essentially unattainable, clouds the multifaceted nature of human history. The intertextual incorporation of William Blake and his work stresses the ambiguity of *Dead Man*, its rejection of simple divisions and clear-cut categories. In the words of William Blake (the poet): “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.”<sup>46</sup>

This speaks directly to the contradictions in Jarmusch’s vision. It coincides with *Dead Man*’s rejection of any clear lines, or Big Truth. Contradictory states, such as innocence and experience, can co-exist simultaneously, and both are equally true. The contradictions in *Dead Man* are in other words best viewed, not as inconsistencies, but as complementary aspects to the narrative, or, rather, as complementary narratives. The purpose of such an approach, consistent with postmodern aesthetics, is that it is the only way to fight myths, that by acknowledging the contradictions in our histories, we actually achieve a fuller understanding of both past and present, because existence is more complex than any simplifying myths, however comforting they may be.

In addition to the character of Bill Blake, *Dead Man* also quotes William Blake’s poetry. The stanzas most frequently cited are:

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<sup>44</sup> Robert N. Essick, commentary to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, by William Blake, ed. Robert N. Essick (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 2008), 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> William Blake, “The Argument,” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, Newly Revised Edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2008), 34.

Every Night & every Morn  
Some to Misery are Born  
Every Morn & every Night  
Some are Born to sweet delight  
Some are Born to sweet delight  
Some are Born to Endless Night<sup>47</sup>

These are taken from the posthumous poem “Auguries of Innocence” (1863). Similar to *Innocence and Experience*, it deals with the contradictions of human existence. Part of the same poem, we also find the following stanzas (not quoted in *Dead Man*)

It is right it should be so  
Man was made for Joy & Woe  
And when this we rightly know  
Thro the World we safely go  
Joy & Woe are woven fine  
A Clothing for the soul divine  
Under every grief & pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine<sup>48</sup>

In the context of *Dead Man*, this means that historicity is never either, or, it is both. To fully understand the past (and the present) it is vital to accept that there exists no neat Grand Narrative, only many, sometimes contradictory, narratives, because failure is part of any subject of human history. In this sense, *Dead Man* makes the story of the West (which in the classic western is celebrated as uniquely American) universal. Such an interpretation is supported by the film’s allusions to Francis F. Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and its inspiration, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Specifically, *Dead Man* mimics both film and novel in its portrayal of the canoe journey towards the Makah village. All three works portray the human capacity for evil by placing the effects of war along rivers. In *Dead Man*, as the canoe slowly drifts downstream, images of death and destruction can be seen along the riverbank in the shapes of burnt-out tipis and corpses. Furthermore, the parallel is made clearer by the train fireman of *Dead Man*’s strong resemblance to the two ladies in *Heart of Darkness* sitting outside the Company office knitting black wool and “guarding the door of Darkness.”<sup>49</sup> In both instances, they function as foreboding gatekeepers to the hell that awaits the protagonists. Although *Apocalypse Now* deals with the Vietnam War, and *Heart of Darkness* is set in Congo, their real concern is the universal potential for evil that lies

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<sup>47</sup> William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 492.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong, A Norton Critical Edition, Fourth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 11.

within all men, as indeed the title of the novel indicates. This means that Jarmusch uses such allusions to emphasize that the western experience equals human experience. The inevitable corruption of innocence by experience is universal, and not uniquely American. The intertextual incorporation of William Blake in *Dead Man* therefore underlines the overall argument that the story and identity of the West (and of America) can only be understood if we are able to reject the simplified story, the myth, the clear-cut distinctions, and instead accept, in the words of Elliot West, “a longer, grimmer, but more interesting story.”<sup>50</sup>

## Violence

The ambiguity revealed in *Dead Man*’s relation to innocence and experience is also reflected in its depiction of violence. According to Melinda Szaloky, the frontier myth as promulgated by the film western is made up of two major themes. The first theme, which she attributes to the legacy of Fredrick Jackson Turner, emphasizes the abundance of free land beyond the frontier, i.e. claims that the land was essentially uninhabited prior to western expansion. The other, represented by “Buffalo Bill” Cody, admits that the land was inhabited by Indians, but views the war against them for possession of land as unproblematic; it was necessary, heroic, and justified by its supposed outcome of civilization and progress.<sup>51</sup> Turner’s Frontier Thesis, largely deriding from his most famous speech, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), has had an enormous impact on both academic and popular interpretations of the West. Although Turner does address the effects of western expansion upon Indians (such as interaction with traders and Indian wars), Szaloky is correct in pointing out his avoidance, or simplification, of its inherent violence, for instance represented by his conclusion that Indian wars unite the Westerners by providing them with a common enemy, as well as his view of the land beyond the frontier line as “free.”<sup>52</sup>

That Buffalo Bill viewed the Indian wars as necessary and just is undisputed, though. He is an excellent example of the complex relationship between history (what actually transpired, and can never be fully retrieved), scholarly and cultural renditions of history (keeping in mind that rendered history is always a cultural construction), and downright fiction, that together form the basis of the western myth. First we have the historical frontiersman of William Frederick “Buffalo Bill” Cody who in 1869 gave Ned Buntline the idea of making him the

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<sup>50</sup> Elliot West, “A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story,” in *Trails*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> Szaloky, 49-50.

<sup>52</sup> Turner, 31, 41.

main character of a dime novel series named “Buffalo Bill,” which haphazardly mixed historicity and fiction. These books were instantly popular among the public, and eventually totaled 121 novels. Nonetheless, what Cody is most famous for is his “Wild West” shows. Although his was only one of about fifty similar shows, Buffalo Bill benefitted from his own lived experience and his fictional alter ego. In addition to himself, the show also featured Native Americans in the roles of Indians, thereby laying claim to historicity in its depiction of western violence. By synthesizing these two views, the western myth sanitizes the role violence has played in the western expansion, by simultaneously disregarding as well as glorifying its effects.

*Dead Man* accepts no such simplification. Admittedly, it does parallel many classic westerns in its obsession with violence. In fact, it is almost as if violence is omnipresent. Such a sensation, of violence constantly lurking just beneath the surface, is achieved not only through displaying scenes of violence, but also by alluding to violence in various ways. The first scene following opening credits - Bill Blake stepping off the train and making his way through the main street of Machine - is a fitting example. Jarmusch uses the *mise-en-scène* of Machine to demonstrate what a violent community Blake has ended up in. First of all the camera lingers on the sign of Machine, which establishes that this is the home of Dickinson Metalworks, indicating that this is a society ruled by capitalism, ruthless capitalism, as it turns out. As Bill makes his way through the town, POV shots showing undertakers and coffins, skulls (animal *and* human) and carcasses displayed on the walls and in giant heaps on the ground (see figure 6), accompanied by Dickensian images (see figure 5) of dirty, strange-looking inhabitants, staring mutely at Blake, demonstrate a society where violence is the only form of communication; where cash is king and the gun does all the talking. This interpretation, of a community in decay, is further strengthened by images of grotesqueness, such as a woman performing fellatio on a man at gunpoint. Without a word, or any action relevant to the narrative, it has effectively been conveyed to the viewer that the frontier, the “end of the line,” is humanity in degeneration, ruled only by capital and violence.



Figure 5. *Dead Man* (screenshot)



Figure 6. *Dead Man* (screenshot)

Superficially the plot of *Dead Man* follows the classic standard of western violence, in that a killing triggers a manhunt, which again triggers more violence. This is a classic plot because it makes scenes of violence plausible. Nonetheless, it is through its particular approach to these scenes that *Dead Man* subverts the myth. In Jarmusch's film there are no dramatic build-ups. Acts of violence erupt suddenly and are depicted in such a matter-of-fact manner



that they seem almost trivial. Moreover, the violence is not balletic. Rather, it is often awkward and clumsy, as when Bill Blake, from close range, has to fire three shots before he hits Charlie in the throat. As Bill grows more experienced his aim improves, but the violence is still viewed in the same way. Usually the scenes feature only static medium shots of the victim intercut with parallel shots of the perpetrator. Neither is there any manipulation of time or space, such as slowing down or speeding up the action, or shooting from multiple angles. The effect of such stylistic simplicity is that it adds to the raw, sometimes grotesque impression the images leave, because the violent acts are not veiled in aesthetic beauty.

In typically ambiguous fashion, though, the matter-of-fact, all-encompassing approach *Dead Man* takes to violence also sends the message that given the right (or, rather, wrong) conditions, violence is inevitable. It is almost as if the frontier is inherently violent. At least that is how it is perceived by the people who experience it, represented by Thel's simple but eloquent response when asked why she has a gun: "Cause this is America." Contrasting the myth, though, little or nothing suggests that there is any hope of change or evolution. "The core of Turner's idea, the recapitulation of the stages of civilization . . . remains an empty promise, and is portrayed at best as a dubious enterprise throughout *Dead Man*."<sup>53</sup> Stasis and repetition are stylistic favorites of Jarmusch's, and they play significant roles in his western as well. For instance, although Blake and Nobody move westward, their journey is sluggish, and only vaguely motivated, and when they arrive at their destination, nothing has really changed. Furthermore, the images of death established in the beginning are repeated in various shapes and forms throughout the film, such as the motif of animal and human skulls. Parallels and repetitions, such as the opening and the end, and the town of Machine and the Makah settlement, communicate that progress is an empty promise, and that history rather is a circulatory process bound to repeat itself. Ironically mimicking the classic western ending of the lonesome cowboy riding off into the horizon, a dying/dead William Blake is brought by the current out to sea, as he originally was brought out west by train. Neither in the beginning nor the end is Bill Blake the decisive hero in charge of his own destiny.

Lack of progression is also represented in the futility of his actions. The frontier myth's simplification of its violent past is in the classic western often expressed through the hero's relation to violence. Although the classic hero is a peaceful man, he is not hesitant about resorting to violence when necessary. Therefore, conflicts are typically solved by his (righteous) violent acts. Significantly, these actions benefit the community by ridding it of

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<sup>53</sup> Szaloky, 55.

evil (the bad guys). The conclusion is therefore that the end justifies the means, and that fire is best fought with fire. Again, on the surface, *Dead Man* mimics the formula. Bill Blake quickly responds to his violent surroundings by retaliating. At first, his actions can be defended as self-defense. As the story develops, however, it becomes harder to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys, for instance represented by Bill and Nobody's encounter with the trapper "family." When they end up killing them, it is in self-defense, but as Bill correctly points out, they might as well have avoided the camp site altogether. In total, the violent acts of Bill and Nobody are self-serving at best. Even more significant, nothing is achieved. As the film ends, all that violence has accomplished is killing the characters involved, good guys, as well as bad. Neither is anything achieved in death. The communities, represented by the town of Machine and the Makah settlement, remain unchanged. In *Dead Man*, therefore, the only effect of violence is death and devastation.

### The Indian

Although *Dead Man* is a strikingly radical film western, its ideas are not entirely original in an academic sense. As Gregg Rickman astutely observes, they are in fact very similar to many of the ideas of the New Western History movement.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, I would argue that Jarmusch's film also shares the movement's roots in the counter-culture of the 1950s and 1960s, in addition to its postmodernist views of history itself. However, *Dead Man* goes beyond the movement in its self-conscious attempt to situate itself among rebels and outsiders, not only of the 1950s and 1960s, but stretching as far back as the Victorian period, thereby emphasizing its oppositional views by association, also very much a postmodern phenomenon.

The New Western History movement began in the early 1980s, but is indebted to the social, political, and cultural changes of the 1950s and 1960s. The rejection of the melting-pot homogeneity and new emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity, as well as social and cultural pluralism, combined with an awareness of ecological fragility and environmental exploitation, eventually led to a similar shift in how the past was viewed and presented. Therefore, by the 1980s, the old understanding of the West and expansionism, emphasizing the frontier theory espoused by Turner and his followers, seemed outdated and simplistic. In 1987 one of the most important thinkers within this movement, Patricia Nelson Limerick, released her highly

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<sup>54</sup> Rickman, 398.

influential work *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. It reflects the changes that had occurred in the scholarly world as well as society at large by viewing the western experience in terms of gender, race, class, industrialization, urbanism, the environment, and global influence, emphasizing that the western experience has not been devoid of conflict, quite the contrary.<sup>55</sup>

Limerick delineates the main shifts that characterize the views of the New Western historians in *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (1991). Among the ones relevant to our purpose, we find that they acknowledge that Frederick Jackson Turner interpreted the western experience in light of his own times, and that he was aware of this fact, but they assert that a hundred years later it is time to reinterpret the past to fit today's multicultural world, admitting that they are not completely objective, neither, and that this is neither a realistic, nor necessarily a desirable goal. Further, they reject the term "frontier" because of its nationalistic and racist connotations. Admittedly, a type of process has occurred, that has had broad implications not only for the West, but for America, and beyond. However, this process has involved the interaction and clashes between a multitude of ethnicities and races, classes, both genders, and their relation to their environment. In other words, the old theories have been too narrow in their focus, too exclusive. The old model has also been too heavily influenced by ideology, in its emphasis on progress and civilization as sole results of western expansionism. The New Western History admits that injury and failure were also part of the western development, as it is part of any subject of human history. In summation, "the most fundamental mission of the New Western History is to widen the range and increase the vitality of the search for meaning in the western past."<sup>56</sup>

One of the main concerns of New Western historians has therefore been to broaden our understanding of Native Americans and their experience of the western expansion. The Indian has in the western myth represented the "other," the human equivalent to the wilderness the frontiersman had to conquer in order to civilize the West. "Consequently, the portrayal of Native Americans could scarcely but be unsympathetic, Eurocentric and degrading."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, in the attempt to broaden the scope, to tell the stories of the under- and misrepresented, Native Americans have again become focal point, although this time as representative of a multicultural West. In coherence with the New Western History

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<sup>55</sup> Peterson, 768.

<sup>56</sup> Limerick, 88.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: The British Film Institute, 1988/New York, Da Capo Press paperback edition), 156, quoted in Janet Walker, ed., *Westerns: Films through History*, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.

movement, *Dead Man* makes the Indian one of its main concerns. As we shall see, the film employs various strategies in its attempt to circumvent the view of the Indian as the “other.” They all however stem from its main objective, which is to adopt a Native American perspective on the western experience, in other words, to make the “other” a part of “us.”

In focusing on the Indian, *Dead Man* adheres to a longstanding tradition that is much older than the New Western History movement. The Indian has been a vital part of western iconography for as long as artists and writers have concerned themselves with the West. Paralleling and complementing the evolution of popular western literature, we find that western visual art was similarly crucial in the development of the aesthetics of the classic film western. This interdependent relationship began with expeditionary artists illustrating what the travelers wrote about. The romanticism evident in the travel accounts is also reflected in the art of this period, which would have enormous impact on subsequent depictions. Even after the 1860s, Native Americans were still depicted as noble, pure, and unspoiled, reflecting that cultural assumptions were more important than historical realities. The intimate relationship between the visual and literary west was also represented by the many artists who submitted illustrations for magazines and dime novels from the 1860s and well into the twentieth century, which further cemented the dialectic between image and word that the film western would perfect. Among the most influential artists of the late eighteenth century we find Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell. Together they created images of the west that still influence our perceptions, both regarding choice of subjects (U.S. military, cowboys and Indians) and aesthetics, which have heavily influenced the look of the classic western movie. For instance, according to Brian W. Dippie, John Ford’s cavalry westerns are indebted to Remington and Russell for everything from camera angles and color to costume and action sequences.<sup>58</sup>

The same trails can be followed in the case of Indian stereotypes, such as the “noble savage” and the “red devil.” The fusion of romanticism and classicism in the first travel accounts’ descriptions of nature correlates to their view of the native population. The “noble savage” stereotype stems from this interpretation of the Indian as innocent, untouched by the corrupting influence of experience, of civilization. In many ways, the Native was viewed as an extension of nature, as part of his surroundings. Simultaneously, though, the view of the Indian as barbarian, the “red devil” stereotype, developed alongside the romantic view. As western expansion progressed, the Indian was increasingly viewed as an obstacle to

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<sup>58</sup> Dippie, 694-698.

civilization, culminating in the Indian wars. Both stereotypes, however, reflect the view of the Native as the unknown “other.” Whether the indigenous population should be revered or feared, both are simplistic views that separate the Indian, the “other,” from “us,” the in-group. (In this sense, *Dead Man* foreshadows *Ghost Dog*’s treatment of American ethnicity).

One of *Dead Man*’s approaches to the subject of the Indian is fairly traditional. Western visual art and the classic western movie have typically paid remarkable attention to surface detail, often combined with a proportionate disregard for historical accuracy of content. By this is meant that more often than not historical accuracy has been regarded as awarding almost obsessive attention to costume, equipment, weaponry, architecture, et cetera, whilst downplaying or ignoring whether or not the content of the image(s) convey historicity. Adhering to the tendency of classic westerns to stress historical accuracy of detail, in *Dead Man*, Jarmusch awards great attention to customs, dress, and tribal languages, as well as casts only Native Americans in the roles of Indians. Such an approach to history goes all the way back to Buffalo Bill and his Wild West show. As mentioned above, in its depiction of the West, it boasted that it featured actual Native Americans in the roles of Indians. Thereby, the assumption was that by focusing on historical accuracy of surface detail, historical authenticity would be the inevitable result, or it would at least be perceived that way by the audience. This belief, that truth lies in the details, was then inherited by the dime novel, as well as by the classic film western. Although similar in execution, the intent behind such an approach is a little different in *Dead Man*. Jarmusch seeks the Native perspective by acknowledging them as audience. Consequently, attention to surface detail becomes important in order to avoid the embarrassment of inaccuracy. *Dead Man* takes it a step further, though, by not translating the Native dialogue. Obviously, only viewers familiar with the languages in question will understand what is being said, implying that Jarmusch presupposes that Native Americans will see his film.

Still, *Dead Man* also features far more interesting attempts at approaching a Native American perspective. The character of Nobody is perhaps the most striking example. Nobody is an unusually complex portrayal of a celluloid Indian. Successfully or not, it is at least evident that Jarmusch has done his utmost to depict a Native American that transcends stereotypes. Being overweight, Nobody certainly does not compare to the classicist/romantic ideal of the noble savage. Rather, he eats, sleeps, prays, swears, reads, has sex, in other words; he is human. He is also multicultural, in the sense that he is educated about British culture (as a result of a forced stay in England), but also in the sense that he is of mixed blood, Ungumpe-Peccana and Absoluca. Here, *Dead Man* also points to another fact seldom

acknowledged in westerns, namely that the term Indian, or Native American, in reality is an umbrella term for a great variety of ethnic groups. Moreover, Nobody is also multicultural in the sense that he has been able to transcend cultural boundaries through his love for the work of William Blake. As revealed by the many times he quotes his poems, Nobody has found strength and identity in the wisdom of an Englishman, not because he is an Anglophile (his catch-phrase is after all “stupid fucking white man”), but because he has been able to incorporate it into his own ethnic identity. Keeping my discussion of *Ghost Dog* in mind, this aspect of Nobody correlates to Jarmusch’s views on consent in American ethnicity, which the “cameo” appearance of Nobody in that film, as mentioned, is an allusion to. The “resurrection” of Nobody in *Ghost Dog* also represents the remarkable resilience of Native American culture. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, not even the most avid supporter of Indian culture would have predicted that a century later, Native Americans would be in such numbers and their culture so vibrant.<sup>59</sup> In *Dead Man*, the way Nobody faces his changing surroundings and the injustices done towards him, by incorporating what is useful to him, in both Euro-American and Native American culture, is a flash-forward, so to speak, to these surprising realities of America at the end of the twentieth century.

There is also of course the aspect of Nobody’s unusual name. Szaloky refers to him as N/nobody, alluding to its obvious irony. It refers to his status as an outcast, a multicultural Frankenstein, rejected by both Indians and white men alike. However, as Szaloky correctly points out, he is also an ironic embodiment of the eradication/falsification of Native American history and culture in the frontier myth. He is N/nobody.<sup>60</sup> Ironical references to the misrepresentation of Native Americans are also reflected in his appearance. For example, he wears a feathered war bonnet, a reference to the most commonly projected misconception; that Indians on an everyday basis walked around in get-up that in reality was only used for warring. Furthermore, his face is painted in war paint, contrasting stripes, which, in the black/white print of the film, makes him look like an all-American, stars-and-stripes caricature of the classic western Indian. Szaloky makes a valid point when she addresses the difficulties of battling such stereotypes: “That the precautions taken by the film to portray a demythicized Indian ultimately result in a self-ironic and self-erasing N/nobody illustrates the near impossibility of eradicating this old and firmly established stereotype.”<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, or, rather, consequently, the overfamiliarity of the stereotypes means they need to be

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<sup>59</sup> For population statistics, see Clyde A. Milner II, introduction to *The Oxford History of the American West*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Szaloky, 59-61.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

addressed. To pretend they never existed, carries the risk of glorifying the subject, in an attempt to rectify the injustices of the past. Therefore, Jarmusch's postmodern approach of ironizing, as well as humanizing, the image of the Indian, although not perfect, is perhaps the only viable alternative.

*Dead Man* also deals with the way Native American culture compares and contrasts with Euro-American culture. Essentially, this parallel is made through the sequences of the town of Machine and the Makah village. The comparison is made especially efficient by their symmetrical placement in the film, marking the beginning and the end, respectively (excluding the intro and outro), thereby also enveloping the narrative. Since a close reading of the Machine sequence has already been given under the "Violence" subhead, suffice it here to devote our attention to the Makah sequence. First, the parallel is made stylistically, through cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène. Mirroring the Machine sequence, by cutting between shots of Blake (and Nobody, which is shouldering him) and POV shots of how Blake perceives the village, we experience the surroundings from Blake's point of view. In both sequences, we are taken along the main street of each settlement, encountering similar people and props along the road. This stylistic repetition induces the viewer to automatically compare the mise-en-scène. Initially, the parallel sequences reveal an important difference in the depictions of white and Indian culture. The moral depravity and degeneracy evident in Machine is not present in the Makah sequence. For instance, both sequences feature a shot of a mother and a child, traditional symbols of the moral wellbeing of a society. However, contrasting the dirty, Dickensian images of Machine, the mother and child of the Makah version are clean and healthy-looking (compare figure 5 and figure 7). Furthermore, there are no equivalent images to the fellatio-at-gunpoint scene of the Machine sequence. Neither does the street in the Makah village lead to an Indian version of Dickinson Metalworks. Rather, the main building in the Makah village seems to be a community house of some sort, where the elders of the tribe congregate to debate Blake's fate. In other words, ruthless capitalism does not possess the power it does in Machine.

Still, the Makah settlement is not Edenic. As in Machine, the Makah village features images of death and decess, such as stretcherbearers and corpses, as well as human skulls and skeletons (compare figure 6 and figure 8). The parallel demonstrates that Native Americans are not exempt from the destructive elements of nature, and of human nature. Indians are not portrayed as innocent creatures of the wild. As indicated by the display of human skulls, death and destruction was part of their existence before western expansion, as it is part of all human existence. Simultaneously, typically Jarmusch, and typically postmodern,

a somewhat different interpretation is also plausible. As Blake awaits his destiny, the camera, in a POV shot, pans over a corpse wrapped and placed in a tree, human skulls on sticks, and a skeleton. Following an intercut shot of Blake, the camera then pans down and lingers on the previously mentioned sewing machine, which seems oddly misplaced on the ground. Consequently, a link is drawn between the images of death and the sewing machine, an iconic image of industrialization. It is almost as if the cancer has already spread. Although the Makah village for the moment lies west of the frontier, the western expansion, “civilization” and industrialization, will eventually devour the entire settlement.



Figure 7. *Dead Man* (screenshot)



Figure 8. *Dead Man* (screenshot)



There are also important differences in the individual characterizations of Native Americans and Euro-Americans. Whereas just about every white portrayal (perhaps only excluding Thel and Bill Blake) is rendered as morally bankrupt to the point of caricature, no such equivalent image of Native Americans can be identified. Admittedly, though, this also hides a problematic aspect of *Dead Man*'s approach to a Native American perspective, namely that the only personified Indian in the film is Nobody, which gives impetus to Szaloky's objection that *Dead Man* is unable to correct the erasure of the Indian from Western/American history. It is almost as if creating balanced portrayals such as that of Nobody is too difficult a task to duplicate, whereas it is far easier to construct humorous, although alienating, caricatures of imperialist evil, such as that of Cole Wilson, or Dick Dickinson.

Summing up the Machine/Makah comparison, although the film does not glorify the Makah settlement, *Dead Man* does describe Native American culture as more humane. Perhaps this is why Jarmusch attempts to balance the picture regarding cultural interaction and culture clashes. Both cultures are portrayed as bigoted in their stigmatization of cross-cultural and ethnic blending and experiences, exemplified by Nobody's story. The union of his parents, although both Native Americans, was not respected by their individual tribes, and Nobody is therefore viewed as a cultural bastard. Similarly, his experiences as a captive in America and England taught him that the white man too regards him as a human curiosity, a freak of nature. In fact, there is not much to be hopeful about in *Dead Man* concerning cross-cultural understanding. The violent results of ethnic and racial conflicts are for instance represented by the scene showing hunters shooting buffaloes from a moving train, a reference to the slaughtering of buffaloes as biological warfare against Indians. The fireman informs Blake that, "government says, they killed a million of them last year alone" (which, according to Jarmusch, actually happened in 1875).<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the trading post scene discussed above further substantiates such an interpretation, that *Dead Man* argues that the western expansion involved a systematic genocide on the native population.

Still, in the midst of all this bleakness, there is a glimmer of hope in the evolving relationship between Bill and Nobody. At first, their dynamic is dominated by miscommunication, a motif in most of Jarmusch's films. The recurring tobacco joke humorously represents the cultural differences that block understanding. Nobody keeps asking for tobacco, while Blake keeps telling him that he does not smoke. Neither does it make much sense to Bill that Nobody confuses him with a poet he has never heard of, which

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<sup>62</sup> Jim Jarmusch, quoted in Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*, 27.

repeatedly draws the “stupid fucking white man” response from Nobody, who is amazed at Blake’s ignorance. However, their common struggles, as two outcasts, fuel their relationship, and in the end, Jarmusch concludes on a sentimental note, through a close-up of Nobody shedding a tear as Blake drifts off to sea.

Nonetheless, it has not been a relationship on equal terms. In *Dead Man*, the Indian guides the hero (both physically and spiritually). Bill Blake is merely a blank canvas for Nobody to paint on. Contrasting the classic western, Bill Blake is not the decisive, individualistic, macho hero. Rather he displays a fundamental passivity in all aspects until Nobody imprints on him his hard-earned wisdom. Eventually, therefore, Blake adopts Nobody’s view of himself as William Blake reincarnate, a poet writing in blood (as encapsulated by his aforementioned punch line, “Do you know my poetry?”). Their relationship is summed up in the final scenes of the film, when Nobody is about to send Blake on his last voyage. Reiterating the cultural misunderstandings displayed earlier in the narrative, Nobody tells Blake that it is time for him to go back to where he came from (meaning where the spirits come from), whereupon Bill answers, “You mean Cleveland?” Similarly, Nobody’s notice to Blake, that he has enclosed some tobacco for his voyage, draws the familiar “I don’t smoke” response. Reflecting the postmodern approach of *Dead Man*, the ending presents two possible conclusions: Blake’s response can be read as ironic, that this time, Blake is in on the joke, that finally, the stupid fucking white man has acquired a Native American perspective. On the other hand, an alternative, and equally plausible, reading interprets Blake’s final response as evidence that nothing has changed, that in spite of Nobody’s efforts, cultural interaction remains elusive.

## Postmodernism

That *Dead Man* applies a postmodern approach to the subject of western myth has been briefly, but repeatedly, referred to during our discussion so far. A postmodernist reading of *Dead Man* gives us a deeper understanding of our findings, and furthermore interconnects some of the film’s most important aspects. To pin down an exact definition of postmodernism is not exactly an easy task. This is perhaps no wonder considering that one of its main characteristics is rejection of established forms, rules, and traditions, and that one of its main objectives is the search for new forms and expressions. By this is meant that the goal is not the new forms themselves, but the very search for renewal. However, such a flexibility, or relativity, might also explain why it has wielded such influence, as an interdisciplinary category, in our changing times.

One of the defining works on postmodernism is Jean Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984). Lyotard tries to explain the postmodern by contrasting it to the modern and the problem of the "unpresentable." Whereas the modern is preoccupied with depicting the actual existence of the unpresentable, "something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible,"<sup>63</sup> the postmodern concerns itself with the unpresentable in presentation itself. "[The postmodern] denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable."<sup>64</sup> This means that postmodernism does not seek comfort in the familiarity of known forms (nostalgia), as modernism does, but holds as one of its main objectives to search for new forms, new expressions.

The classic western can be classified as modern insofar as it provides the viewer the "solace of good forms." As shown above, the aesthetics, concerns, and views of the western, although their origins are hundreds of years old and originate from western literature, art, popular culture, and scholarship, once set, have remained remarkably fixed. The frontier myth, as espoused by the western, has represented the "unattainable," which through the repetition of form has been enveloped in nostalgia, nostalgia for the unattainable, i.e. nostalgia for something lost, or something which may never have existed. *Dead Man* rejects the nostalgia for the unattainable, in its rejection of the western myth. Instead, it employs a variety of structural and narrative strategies in its search for more complex expressions, for instance exemplified by our delineation of *Dead Man*'s approach to the subject of innocence and experience in the frontier myth. It subverts familiar conventions and images of the classic western, such as those of the hero, family, nature, and narrative structure.

Nonetheless, this rejection of the old, of the established, hides a dependence on the very same that it rejects. In this sense, the postmodern is inconceivable without the modern. After all, without the established forms of the modern there would be nothing to break free from, nothing to rebel against. Fredric Jameson helps us apply this aspect to film theory: "It is because the formal apparatus of nostalgia films has trained us to consume the past in the form of glossy images that new and more complex 'postnostalgia' statements and forms become possible."<sup>65</sup> Applied to *Dead Man*, this means that it is our familiarity with the frontier myth

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<sup>63</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 10 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 78.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>65</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 287.

and the conventions of the western that make postmodern revision possible. Consequently, Jarmusch is dependent on the very same conventions and myths he rebels against.

This tension between tradition and invention, old and new, helps explain the eclecticism that often characterizes postmodernist expressions. Postmodernism uses and exploits both popular and elite literature and culture in its search for new forms. Through reinterpretation and reinvention it concerns itself with the very act of telling/showing stories and remembering told/shown stories. As a result, postmodernist texts are characterized by the fact that both narrator and viewer/reader are aware of this process. Therefore, to avoid the solace of good forms, postmodernist texts make use of what Degli-Esposti terms different “strategies of disruption,” such as self-reflexivity, intertextuality, bricolage, multiplicity, and simulation through parody and pastiche.<sup>66</sup> Through such strategies, the focus remains on the unrepresentable in presentation itself. In other words, they help remind us that a text is a cultural production, and by implication, that all texts are cultural productions. By denying us the solace of good forms, strategies of disruption block any possibility of sharing the nostalgia for the unattainable.

Accordingly, *Dead Man* weaves a tapestry of influence in its search for alternatives to the western myth and the conventions of the classic western. It denies us the solace of good forms by interrupting the narrative with references that are intended to turn our attention to its themes, but also, to stress, elaborate upon, or complicate its viewpoints. Jarmusch even uses casting as a strategy of interruption. For instance, the casting of Robert Mitchum as Dick Dickinson, or Iggy Pop as Salvatore “Sally” Jenko, illustrate *Dead Man*’s self-conscious approach to the conventions of the western. Mitchum’s character is not only shaped by the performance itself, but also by Mitchum’s past, as a western icon. His over-the-top portrayal of Dick Dickinson is therefore infused with a certain irony, “almost a parody of his earlier western personae.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Iggy Pop’s appearance as Sally interrupts the narrative, because what the viewer sees is not the character of Salvatore “Sally” Jenko, but Iggy Pop in a dress. This is of course due to Iggy’s notoriety as a punk rocker. Admittedly, as mentioned in the introduction to my study, Jarmusch is known for casting friends in his films, especially musicians, but the effect is nonetheless that anyone familiar with rock music will interpret the character of Sally as a cameo appearance by Iggy Pop, thereby interrupting the illusion of narrative as “real.”

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<sup>66</sup> Cristina Degli-Esposti, ed., *Postmodernism in the Cinema* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998), 4.

<sup>67</sup> Szaloky, 59.

Consequently, the casting of Iggy Pop and Robert Mitchum also represents the way *Dead Man* self-consciously situates itself in a tradition of outsiders and rebels. Drawing from both popular and so-called “high” culture, *Dead Man* emphasizes its oppositional sentiments through its repeated allusions to the counterculture of the 1960s and the literary radicals of Henri Michaux (1899-1984) and William Blake. Such references also contribute (through similarity of vision) to linking the present and the past, illustrating that our interpretation of the past is essentially our interpretation of ourselves, or, in the terms of postmodernism, our interpretation of the present *as* past. The music of *Dead Man* is another example of the many references to the counter-culture. The entire score was apparently conducted “live” by Neil Young as he watched the film on a big screen.<sup>68</sup> Having an improvisational electric guitar score accompany the images is an unusual approach for a western. The effect is that not only does it interrupt the illusion that we are watching a period piece, and connect the past to the present, but the oppositional, counterculture sentiments that are associated with rock’n’roll in general, and Neil Young in particular (a singer/songwriter associated with politically liberal viewpoints since the 1960s, both in his lyrics and through activism), induce the viewer to see *Dead Man* as the continuation of a lineage of artistic political opposition that has its roots in the counterculture.

However, *Dead Man* also draws our attention to the fact that the visions of the counterculture were similarly rooted in the past, notably through the film’s references to the lives and works of William Blake and Henri Michaux. Michaux is only alluded to once, through the film’s epigraph. The most important function of the quote, “It is preferable not to travel with a dead man,” disregarding its obvious summation of the plot of the film, is to refer to the artist and his writing. Michaux fits well into *Dead Man*’s band of rebels: “Michaux is a destroyer of old forms and an adventurer in the unknown, an enemy of convention and received ideas, and a believer in life with all its insecurities, searching and tensions,”<sup>69</sup> a summation that would also capture the essence of Jarmusch’s work pretty accurately. Furthermore, the rejection of past form and meaning, the search for new forms, and the acceptance of the troublesome aspects of life also describe New Western History and postmodernism alike. Moreover, although an extensive analysis of Michaux’s work lies outside the reach of this chapter, its themes illuminate the aspirations of Jarmusch’s, of which Peter Broome’s informative work on Michaux is indicative. Under “Themes,” it features the following subchapters: “Revolt,” “The Absurd,” “Dream and Nightmare,” “Travel,” “Poetic

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<sup>68</sup> Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Laurie Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement* (Saratoga, California: Anma Libri, 1985), 2.

Magic,” Spirituality and Duality,” and “Experimental Conquest,” all indicative of the similarity of vision to *Dead Man*.<sup>70</sup>

The intertextual allusions to William Blake here perform a similar function. Blake has remained a highly important influence, even in our time, a fact that Edward Larrissy attributes to his standing as a revolutionary, a rebel against bourgeois morality: “In a society which is increasingly paranoid about the extent to which it is influenced by dark forces of multinational capital, or the extent to which it is coming adrift from any centre of value, or simply about the persistence of evil and suffering in a society of plenty, Blake is seen as offering appropriate imagery.”<sup>71</sup>

The allusions to past (re)visionaries reflect *Dead Man*’s kinship to its scholarly contemporary, New Western History. To reiterate, in its quest for a widening of the range of western history - focusing on subjects such as minorities, women, the environment, and imperialism - and in its assertion that injustices and failures also accompanied the western expansion, the movement is firmly rooted in social and political changes of the 1950s and 1960s, including the counterculture. Moreover, such an approach to history means that the New Western History movement also shares the postmodern aspects of *Dead Man*. Their common rejection of the frontier myth parallels the postmodern rejection of the Grand Narrative. The postmodern rejection of the sublime, of the unrepresentable, means that the Grand Narrative, the simplified, streamlined story, is replaced by a multitude of smaller, more complicated, and often contradictory stories. This does not, however, reveal postmodernism as necessarily nihilistic. Rather, postmodernism rejects the existence of any Big Truth, but claims that by focusing on the search for new forms, many truths will emerge. Contradictions and inconclusive presentations are therefore not only acceptable, but preferable. Consequently, reflecting the epigraph of this chapter, *Dead Man* aligns itself with New Western History in its postmodern preference for a multitude of more complex, more diverse, and more inclusive, stories. Therefore, Jarmusch is adamant in his rejection of the Grand Narrative (the frontier myth), but presents alternative visions mainly in its rejection of the old. *Dead Man* rages, questions, and doubts, but its conclusions are tentative and contradictory.

*Dead Man*’s approach to the theme of violence is a good example. Here, the film is revisionist first and foremost in its rejection of the simplified image classic westerns purport. As we have seen, it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions as to what alternatives Jarmusch presents. After all, violence in *Dead Man* is portrayed as part of the human

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<sup>70</sup> Peter Broome, *Henri Michaux*, Athlone French Poets (London: The Athlone Press, 1977).

<sup>71</sup> Edward Larrissy, *Blake and Modern Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 93.

condition, described as inevitable, given certain societal, economical, and environmental conditions, as those of the frontier. Besides, acts of violence are committed by all main characters, including the heroes. In other words, Jarmusch presents various “stories,” and the only thing we can conclude with any real certainty is that, although they may seem contradictory, the idea is that the sum total reveals some of the complexity of the issue. A postmodernist reading of *Dead Man* therefore helps reconcile such seemingly contradictory narratives, in its assertion that contradictions are part of the complexity that is our existence.

In conclusion, let us follow Jarmusch’s structural example, and connect end to beginning. The epigraph of this chapter states that, what makes myth dangerous is that it “masquerades as the ‘whole story’.” The fundamental fallacy of myth is therefore not that it is false, but that it is exclusionary. It creates a “depoliticized and sanitized reality” by leaving out, or adapting, anything that does not conform to its agenda. Any text seeking to subvert myth, as *Dead Man* does, must therefore hold as its main objective to complicate the story, that is, to include as many stories as possible, even if they may seem contradictory.

*Dead Man* is therefore Jarmusch’s most explicitly political and postmodern film. As reflected by my subchapters, it attacks all aspects of the western myth with fervor, subverting and inverting the norms and traditions of the western, but it hesitates to draw any definite conclusions, perhaps out of fear of creating its own mythology. For instance, violence is portrayed as deplorable and futile, but also as inevitable and universal. Comparably, significant effort is made to include Native Americans as an integral part of America, by both humanizing and ironizing the image of the Indian, striving to surpass centuries of negative and positive stereotyping. *Dead Man* paints an unflattering image of expansionist America, past and present, but I would still maintain that the agenda is not to demonize American history and identity, but to humanize it, to present it as contradictory; both flawed and ferocious, as any human endeavor.

## Chapter 4. The American Dream in *Stranger than Paradise*

The humor, the sadness, the EVERYTHING-ness and American-ness of these pictures!

Jack Kerouac, introduction to *The Americans*

In spite of its foreign sensibility, *Stranger than Paradise* is a decidedly American film. Not only is its overall concern the American Dream, but its approach to the subject makes use of American history and contemporary sociopolitical issues (of the 1980s), as well as the of the very American film genre, the road movie. Admittedly, the film is also highly indebted to the work of Japanese filmmaker Yasujirô Ozu, but the point is that, rather than considering the subject matter from a distance, in his first feature film, Jarmusch engages the rich and multifaceted cultural, political, and social American past and present, in an attempt to grasp the enormous reach of the Dream. This approach is established already in the opening sequences of the film, which is a typical Jarmuschian strategy. He uses the opening sequences of his films not only as introductions to the narratives, but, also, and more importantly, as introductions to his methodology. In *Stranger than Paradise*, particularly the first three sequences function as gateway to his approach.

Superficially, and separately, the sequences merely depict a Hungarian girl (Eva) coming to stay for ten days at her reluctant host and cousin's (Willie) New York apartment. However, a close reading reveals a deeper complexity. First, Jarmusch applies the perspective of the immigrant, the quintessential American, as symbolic and narrational tool in his search for the Dream. Second, he makes use of a postmodern approach to the immigrant experience as history, presenting the past as present. And, third, he also comments on the sociopolitical contemporary context of *Stranger* through postmodern intertextual references to the counterculture of the 1950s, illuminating the film's opposition to the American Dream as espoused by Reaganism. The sequences are constructed as follows:

Title (*Stranger than Paradise*)  
Sequence one  
Opening credits  
Sequence two  
Episode title ("The New World")  
Sequence three

The first sequence is made up of only one sequence shot. A stationary (deadpan) camera captures Eva standing at an airport watching a plane land. The print is a grainy



monochromatic black/white. With this in mind, the staging of the scene – Eva’s back towards the camera, combined with her indistinct all black attire - alludes to stereotypical celluloid portrayals of nineteenth century immigrants entering New York harbor, gazing at the statue of liberty, the symbolic embodiment of their hopes and dreams for the New World. Such an interpretation is of course strengthened by the first episode title, “The New World,” due to its inherent connotations to historical views of Europe as the “Old World” and America as the “New,” and consequently also to American immigration, past and present. Such a postmodern reading, past as present (thus a reversal of Jarmusch’s approach to history in *Dead Man*, where the present is presented as past, meaning that images of the past also invoke the present), is also supported by the emptiness of the frame. As Eva is standing at an empty construction site, with no visible buildings, only the two planes in the frame reveal that she is at an airport. Consequently, as information is restricted to a nondescript traveler and a mode of transportation, the viewer is induced to meditate upon travel and migration as a universal and timeless phenomenon. After a few seconds, she picks up her bag and suitcase and walks out of the frame. The shot continues, however, as a non-diegetic melancholy string suite is added to the image and provides continuation as the sequence fades to black and opening credits, thereby further underlining the allusion to cinematic period pieces. Accordingly, by incorporating structural and technical elements of familiar renditions of the past in a contemporary setting, the overall function of the sequence (especially when viewed in relation to the following sequences) is to connect the contemporary (1980s) plot – a Hungarian girl traveling to America – to American immigration of the past (see figure 9).

This approach is elaborated upon in sequence two, which is also comprised of a single shot. The stationary camera focuses on a ringing telephone. After a short while, Willie, a hipster dressed in second hand 1950s clothing, enters the tiny apartment and answers the phone. It becomes clear from the conversation that the caller is Willie’s aunt, Aunt Lotte, in Cleveland, who needs him to take Eva in for ten days while Lotte (with whom Eva is supposed to stay) is hospitalized. Willie objects on the grounds that he has not kept in touch with his Hungarian family for the past ten years and does not even consider himself part of the family anymore. Still he reluctantly complies. Moreover, he refuses to speak Hungarian and even insists that Aunt Lotte speaks English, although he evidently understands Hungarian. Consequently, the second sequence continues the past as present approach by outfitting Willie with a rather archaic approach to assimilation. His approach to Americanization - complete rejection of his Hungarian past (a point revisited throughout the film) - was more prevalent among immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, when

pressure to conform to WASP standards was more intense, and seems strangely outdated set in the multicultural reality of the 1980s. *Stranger than Paradise* therefore draws parallels between past ethnocentrism, when Eastern Europeans *were* discriminated against, and ethnocentrism of the Reagan era, when new immigrant groups once again challenged American openness towards immigration.

The third sequence introduces us to a couple of more aspects of Jarmusch's American Dream. Composed of two shots separated by a black fade, the first shot features a deadpan camera focused on a New York street. After a few seconds, Eva walks into the frame, stops to turn on a cassette player that diegetically plays Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I Put a Spell on You," and walks out of the frame. The following shot dollies with Eva as she walks down a run-down neighborhood, Hawkins' crazed voice accompanying the *mise-en-scène*. The track, which turns out to be a favorite of Eva's, and therefore becomes a recurrent motif of the film, is significant for several reasons. Its function in the third sequence is to introduce us to *Stranger's* approach of contrasting dream/myth with the reality the film presents. In the context of the film, and as indicated by the song title, the lyrics reflect the hold the American Dream has, and continues to have, over immigrants to the New World. "I Put a Spell on You" ironically contrasts this myth to the *mise-en-scène*, the dilapidated, almost empty streets and buildings Eva passes, which fail to put a spell on anyone.

However, the song also works *with* the *mise-en-scène*, stressing, rather than contrasting the content of the images. "I Put a Spell on You" is therefore also important as an intertextual element. Although the song is far better known in other versions, it is not coincidental that Jarmusch chooses Screamin' Jay Hawkins' recording. Although Hawkins wrote the song, and was the first to perform and release it in 1956, the many cleaner and less disturbing cover versions put out since, for instance by Nina Simone and The Alan Price Set, did far better in the charts. The point is that Jarmusch's incorporation of Hawkins' deranged performance represents *Stranger's* attempt at portraying "the other side" of 1980s America. As will be elaborated upon in our discussion of the film's relation to the road movie genre, Jarmusch uses such allusions to the underground 1950s as contrasting *Stranger's* sociopolitical context of Reaganism. By referring to 1950s rebellion, such as subversive rock'n'roll (and, as we shall see, Beat poets and artists), against the conformist "fifties" of the Eisenhower era, the film presents alternative visions to the values represented by the Reagan administration. In other words, Jarmusch seeks to expose Reaganism's simplifying versions of the American Dream by comparing them to the ideals of the Eisenhower era, thereby self-consciously

situating *Stranger* in the company of outsiders of the 1950s underground scene, seeking to identify his film (by association) as a rebel against oppressive political forces of the 1980s.



Figure 9. *Stranger than Paradise* (screenshot)

## The American Dream

The meaning of the term “the American Dream” is taken for granted to such an extent that it is very rare to find scholars who seek to define it. Jim Cullen is one of the few who does attempt a definition. He traces its roots back to the very inception of the nation (as does Jarmusch, by naming his first episode “The New World”). The term itself Cullen attributes to James Truslow Adams and his seminal work *The Epic of America*, where it is reportedly referred to more than thirty times. Significantly, Cullen establishes that the American Dream is best understood as plural, *American Dreams*, because what the Dream refers to has meant different things to different people, and it has evolved over the course of time. However, most American Dreams conform to the “Dream of the Good Life,” what *The Epic of America* refers to as the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”<sup>72</sup>

This overarching category Cullen divides into three subcategories: “The Puritan Enterprise,” “Upward Mobility,” and “The Coast.” What unites all three is the accumulative goal of ending up with more than you started with. Although emphasizing that he views all

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<sup>72</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931), 404.

categories as national, or even global, phenomena, Cullen awards each a geographic historical center. Quickly rendered, The Puritan Enterprise represents spiritual advancement, to secure a future in the next world. Historically speaking, New England has of course represented the Puritan center. The second Dream, Upward Mobility, encapsulates all aspirations of socio-economic climbing. The idea is that hard work and intelligence pay off. It has most purely been expressed in the Midwest, and it is closely linked to Lincoln and his legacy, and therefore to Illinois. The third category, however, the Dream of the Coast, has less to do with accumulating wealth (although it is often a prerequisite) than it has to do with living off its fruits. Its symbolic location is therefore the beach, and it is geographically centered in California, where the dream of “money for nothing” reaches from the Gold Rush of 1849 to contemporary Hollywood.<sup>73</sup>

The reason for this delineation is not to reveal Cullen as an inspiration of Jarmusch's. After all, given that *Stranger* was released in 1984 and *The American Dream* was published in 2003, to do so would have been quite an achievement. Nonetheless, both filmmaker and scholar do approach the subject in strikingly similar fashion. This is however due to the fact that both Cullen and Jarmusch address the American Dream as collective myth; as the sum total of folklore, history, scholarly, literary, and pop-cultural renditions, of what has essentially become American national ideology. This is also indicative of why it remains so hard to define. Accordingly, in the context of this chapter, Cullen's categories should not be understood as an exhaustive delineation of the American Dream, but rather as a tool illuminating the way Jarmusch relates to the subject. Put differently, Cullen's categories can help us analyze the structure of *Stranger*, and the route Jarmusch chooses, a route that, despite his unknowing characters, is far from arbitrary, and that involves the geography and history of the American Dream, as well as its sociopolitical contemporary context.

At first glance there are of course obvious discrepancies between *Stranger* and *The American Dream*, most notably regarding locations. Whereas Cullen marks New England as the beginning of the American Dream, Jarmusch's point of origin is New York. Similarly, Willie and Eddie follow Eva in pursuit of the dream of Upward Mobility to Cleveland, Ohio, not Lincoln's Illinois. And finally, The Coast is in *Stranger* represented by Florida, rather than California. Nonetheless, such differences are incidental. After all, New York and New England both belong to the Northeast, and both are representatives of old immigration. Similarly, Ohio and Illinois are both Midwestern states, historically associated with farming

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<sup>73</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4-10, 159-184.

and industrial labor. And finally, Florida, with its enormous coastline, its many beaches and retirement communities, as well as its tropical climate and close proximity to the Caribbean, is as fitting a representation of the Dream of the Coast as California.

Consequently, let us return to the “The New World.” Regarding content, the first Dream of Cullen’s, *The Puritan Enterprise*, does not parallel the first episode of Jarmusch’s film to a great extent, but it does illuminate one of the most important aspects of *Stranger*, which is to engage history by presenting the past as present, thereby inevitably viewing the immigrant experience in a historical context. As shown above, *Stranger* uses its opening sequences to draw lines between contemporary immigrants and immigrants of the past. The difference between Cullen and Jarmusch’s approach is that whereas Cullen begins his story with first wave immigrants (Puritans), Jarmusch primarily refers to the third wave, which consisted for the most part of immigrants from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, and who came in large numbers in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. A possible rationale for why Jarmusch alludes to the third wave rather than the first as symbolizing the American immigrant is cinematic. The world of cinema has been far more concerned with this period than with the seventeenth century and the Puritans, and Jarmusch therefore exploits the viewer’s familiarity with images of third wave meetings with the New World, as illustrated by our close reading of the first sequences.

In episode two, “One Year Later,” the plot takes Willie and Eddie to the Midwest and Cleveland where they plan to visit Eva and Aunt Lotte. Reiterating Cullen, the Midwest is the geographical representation of the Dream of Upward Mobility, and Lincoln its foremost symbol. After all, the phrase “log cabin to White House,” describing the American creed that anything is possible in the land of opportunity, refers to Lincoln’s rise from poor beginnings to president of the United States. In addition, his Homestead Act represented a leveling of the field, ensuring each man the possibility of upward mobility if only he was willing and able to work hard for it.

This is the historical background lurking behind the scenes of Jarmusch’s rendition of Cleveland. The 1980s Midwest is as such contrasted with the historical Midwest. First of all, this is reflected in the *mise-en-scène*. In “The New World,” Eddie promises Eva that Cleveland is a “beautiful city,” although he has never seen it. Their experience of it turns out to be a little different, though. Jarmusch portrays the Midwest essentially as post-industrial wasteland. The snow, the fog, the impoverished surroundings, the general drabness of the scenery, all contribute to make the Midwest look like staple documentary footage of communist Eastern Europe. This approach is continued in the interior design of Aunt Lotte’s

house. Although cozy, it is cramped and unassuming, and reflects that Aunt Lotte has experienced anything but upward mobility in her life. The general *lack* of opportunity is also reflected in Eva's experience. Her year in Cleveland has only brought her a job in a fast-food restaurant, and she is still living with her aunt. Furthermore, all scenery in episode two is enveloped in a grey whiteness that limits visibility and makes it look isolated from the rest of the world. This is most clearly expressed in the scene where Eva, Willie, and Eddie drive out to Lake Erie to take in the scenery. Staring out at the frozen lake, which in the monochromatic footage looks like white nothingness, Eva comments, "this is nowhere." Rather than realizing the Dream of Upward Mobility in the Midwest, the characters in *Stranger* find this dream to be a dead end, "the end of the line," to borrow the train fireman's description of the Frontier in *Dead Man*.

Here, the film not only addresses the discrepancies between promises (and, to some extent, realities) of the past and realities of the 1980s, but it is also a comment on the increasing differences between winners and losers of Reaganomics. Reaganomics, or supply-side economics, was a success in that it eventually restored the American GDP. However, this meant accepting a deep recession in order to curb inflation, drastic tax-cuts in the higher income brackets, as well as severe reductions in Great Society anti-poverty programs. The Midwest was awarded a disproportionate amount of this burden. The region experienced high unemployment, and estimates suggest that the total value of United States farmland decreased from \$712 billion in 1980 to \$392 billion in 1986.<sup>74</sup> In this context, episode two of *Stranger* is a comment on the way in which the Midwest went from representing the Dream of Upward Mobility to becoming a symbol of the drawbacks of Reaganomics, known for poor farmland and postindustrial wasteland; "the Rustbelt."

According to Cullen, the various American Dreams can further be arranged according to historical evolvement (although he stresses that all variations overlap). Not surprisingly, therefore, since the Dream of the Puritan Enterprise is epitomized by the Puritans and the seventeenth century, and the Dream of Upward Mobility is represented by Lincoln and the nineteenth century, the Dream of the Coast predominates the twentieth century's understanding of the American Dream. As mentioned, the core of this dream is to acquire fame and fortune without seeming effort, and it is consequently more about living off the

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<sup>74</sup> Esmond Wright, *The American Dream: From Reconstruction to Reagan*, A History of the United States of America, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), 481, 513.

fruits of wealth than about generating it. Cullen labels it “the most alluring and insidious of American Dreams.”<sup>75</sup>

In *Stranger than Paradise*, the search for this dream is represented by our protagonists’ journey to Florida, in the third and final episode, “Paradise.” At first, Jarmusch seems to approach this American Dream much in the same way as he does in the case of *Upward Mobility*. The alluring Florida, epitomized in the 1980s television series *Miami Vice* (which began airing in 1984, the year of *Stranger*’s release), is conspicuously absent from the mise-en-scène of “Paradise.” Instead, Jarmusch focuses on the exterior and interior of a cheap motel, and even when the beach is featured, it looks cold, deserted, and unattractive. This lack of glitz and glamour is emphasized by the film’s minimalistic approach to cinematography, detailed in our close reading above.

However, Jarmusch’s relation to *The Coast* is not as straightforward as in the case of *Upward Mobility*. Especially the plot reflects this ambiguity. Already in “The New World,” Willie and Eddie reveal their interest for making dollars without actually earning them, first losing at the races, then winning (by cheating) in a card game, which enables/forces them to go on the road. In “Paradise,” they gamble again, first losing most of their money on horses, then winning it back at the dog races. For Eva too *The Dream of the Coast* represents ambivalence. Bored, having been left alone at the motel room, she takes a walk along the beach, and, due to a case of mistaken identity, is handed a bag full of money. Significantly, though, whether the characters win or lose, it does not seem to change anything. Admittedly, in a bizarre twist, Willie ends up on a plane to Budapest, Eddie apparently drives back to New York, while Eva decides to continue her American venture. Nonetheless, such an open, ambiguous ending leaves it up to the viewer to decide whether or not this means that they have “made it,” whether or not their American Dreams have come true.

The episode title of the last chapter is an interesting case in point. Of course, “Paradise” refers to the Dream of the Coast, the dream of being able to live the Good Life, without having to work to sustain it. But it also connects the ending to the beginning of the film (as we have seen, a favorite structural device of Jarmusch’s, employed in all three films), as well as the present to the past. Seen in relation to “The New World,” “Paradise” reflects the historical roots of the American Dream and the immigrant experience. As discussed in our chapter on *Dead Man*, the view of America as the New World coincided with the interpretation of the land as essentially unspoiled and innocent, as Edenic. The vision of 1980s America presented

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<sup>75</sup> Cullen, 9.

in *Stranger*, the America that Eddie, Willie, and Eva experience, is consequently contrasted to the historical view of America as the Promised Land, the American Dream that pulled the “huddled masses” to its shores. And, as explained, Jarmusch’s “Paradise” is anything but Edenic. However, the episode titles also reflect the flexibility and sustainability of the Dream. Nearly four hundred years after the first Puritan settlements, the Dream endures. The content of the Dream may change, but the hope of a better life is still at its center. In spite of adversity and broken promises, as long as good fortune strikes from time to time, the *possibility* of the Dream exists, and in the end, that is all that matters. In this sense, the search for the American Dream becomes more important than its fulfillment.

### The Road Movie

This search has in the world of cinema found its purest expression in the road movie. Accordingly, the genre can be viewed as representing the western frontier ethos in a modern world, where the automobile has replaced the horse, and where the yearning to “go West” has been supplanted by a restless urge to “hit the road.” It is therefore only fitting that *Stranger than Paradise* presupposes *Dead Man* in its relation to genre. Both films are only interested in revising genre to the extent that it serves their thematic concerns. Consequently, *Stranger* treats the road movie pretty much the same way that *Dead Man* relates to the classic western. It employs and exploits the viewer’s familiarity with the traditions and conventions of the genre.

*Stranger* belongs to the postmodern revival of road movies that coincided with the rise of American independent film in the 1980s. It contrasted Hollywood, where the existential road movie of the 1970s had been replaced by comedy and farce, exemplified by *The Cannonball Run* (1981) and its sequel, *Cannonball Run II* (1984). Still, *Stranger* stands out even compared to its postmodern contemporaries. As explained in our chapter on *Dead Man*, modernism precedes and informs postmodernism. Correspondingly, the postmodernist road movie reinterprets the aesthetics of the modern road movie. In the 1980s (and 1990s) this typically expressed itself in the shape of a stylized and ironic spectacle of violence and sex, or as tongue-in-cheek cool.<sup>76</sup> *Stranger* clearly only conforms to the latter characteristic. Jarmusch’s roadmovie stresses immobility, not spectacle. In fact, superficially, the only thing identifying the film as a road movie is the fact that the characters travel, to Ohio and Florida,

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<sup>76</sup> David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 132-134.



and that they get there by car. The automobile and the road are not emphasized at all. Nonetheless, a closer look will reveal the way Jarmusch reaches back to the modern roots of the genre, in order to draw parallels between past and present. *Stranger* therefore also deviates from the postmodern tendency of avoiding political, social, or historical concerns. Although the characters of Jarmusch's film do demonstrate postmodern ironic cool, the film as a whole is not ironic. On the contrary, its very reason for revising the road movie genre is not to avoid, but to address its contemporary sociopolitical context.

Expressing cultural critique through the narrative tool of "the journey" has longstanding traditions, according to David Laderman. He stretches its literary origins all the way back to Homer's *Odyssey*, but also includes Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, regarding the road movie genre, no other literary work has wielded the type of influence that Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* has. Written in 1951 and published in 1957, it became the blueprint for the type of modern/rebel road movie that originated in the late 1960s. The novel, based on travels made by Kerouac across the American continent 1947-1950, articulates the bohemian lifestyle of the Beats and their rebellion against the cultural conformism of the Eisenhower era. It stands in stark contrast to "the fifties," that emphasized Calvinist work ethic, traditional, conservative family values, and middle-class materialism. The Beats, alongside rebellious musicians and other artists, voiced the 1950s of the underground, preceding the counterculture of the 1960s, which in turn would find its cinematic expression in the road movies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, beginning with *Easy Rider* (1969).<sup>77</sup>

It is this dialectic between mainstream society and subculture that Jarmusch seeks to express by incorporating the road movie genre in *Stranger*. By referring specifically to its modern origin, Jarmusch compares Reagan's America to the Eisenhower era, and his own work to the cultural rebellion of the underground 1950s. Curiously, though, *Stranger* does not situate itself in a tradition of oppositionality by referring to the spectacle, speed, and noise of the road movie. As will be dealt with below, stylistically, Jarmusch's road movie has more in common with minimalist Japanese cinema than with American road movies. In fact, *Stranger* adheres to very few of the characteristics of the "classic" phase of the road movie (the late 1960s and 1970s). The reason for this is that Jarmusch seeks to avoid the romanticizing myths evident in the road movie and its literary genesis, *On the Road*. For instance, the road movie inherited *On the Road*'s glorification of the automobile and the road. The automobile is

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<sup>77</sup> Laderman, 10.

praised for its function as the vehicle that enables the search for the American Dream, that promises freedom through movement and speed. Correspondingly, the road movie mimics the classic western, in its depiction of road and landscape as liberating, emphasizing the open, vast spaces of the western highways.

This view is conspicuously absent in *Stranger*. The traveling shot, a stylistic favorite of the road movie, used to emphasize speed and majestic scenery, is awarded almost the opposite function in Jarmusch's film. First of all, we rarely see the moving car from the outside, and the camera never dollies with the vehicle (as it does with a walking Eva, described above). The result is to strip the driving sequences of any sense of speed. For the most part, driving is shot from within the car. In poor lighting, at times approaching chiaroscuro, the outside world, the road, comes across as claustrophobic whiteness, as all-engulfing fog (see figure 2). Consequently, we are deprived of any liberating view of the landscape, as well as of the contrasting effect scenery offers (emphasizing the movement of a passing vehicle). Rather, focus is directed inwards, to the limited interior space of the car. Besides, when we do get a glimpse of the outside world, the scenery is depressing rather than awe-inspiring, more akin to stereotypical images of the Old World than of the New, as expressed in Eddie's question, "Does Cleveland look a little like Budapest?" The effect is to downplay the overall importance of the automobile and the road, especially their supposedly liberating functions, thereby rejecting the frontier myth (again foreshadowing *Dead Man*). In *Stranger than Paradise*, a car is just a means of getting from one place to another, and a road is simply the distance in between.

Another reason why Jarmusch devaluates the road movie's heady spectacle is its obvious connotations to excess. Inherent in *On the Road* and the road movie's rebellion against restrictive conformity lies a devotion to pushing boundaries, hence the allure of the horizon, of the frontier. This view of excess as an expression of freedom, or yearning for freedom, is perhaps no better described than in Hunter S. Thompson's novel, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). A direct descendant of Kerouac's *On the Road*, it portrays the search for, and eventual failure of, the American Dream of the counterculture generation, as expressed through a drug-fuelled road trip to Las Vegas, shrine to the American Dream of the Coast, to adhere to Cullen's terminology. However, by the 1980s, excess in filmmaking had become Hollywood normalcy (as exemplified by the aforementioned *Cannonball Run* films). And even more important, excess was fast becoming the ideal in American culture at large. The early 1980s' fascination with the rich and the glamorous, represented by the success of prime time television series *Dynasty* (which started airing in 1981), is symptomatic of the economic

policies of the Reagan administration. Reaganomics was a triumph for upper America: “Most of the Reagan decade, to put it mildly, was a heyday for unearned income as rents, dividends, and interest gained relative to wages and salaries as a source of wealth and increasing economic inequality.”<sup>78</sup> In such a sociopolitical climate it makes more sense, as Jarmusch does, to present minimalist restriction and discipline as means of expressing rebellion, rather than extravagance and excess.

Consequently, Jarmusch is more interested in the origin of the road movie than in its classic phase. As mentioned, the classic road movie is strongly related to the western, but it is also a descendant of Depression-era social conscience films and noir road films.<sup>79</sup> According to Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, the road movie can be seen as a representative of its time, typically emerging at times of upheaval or dislocation (such as the 1930s), or as a reaction to dominant, oppressive ideologies (such as the late 1960s).<sup>80</sup> It is this tradition that Jarmusch alludes to through his particular take on the road movie. He incorporates the locations of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, such as diners and cheap motels, but the mise-en-scène just as much refers to another seminal work depicting 1950s America: *The Americans*. Suitably titled, *The Americans* comprises photographs taken by Kerouac’s associate and friend, the photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank. The strong link between Kerouac’s novel and Frank’s photographs is indicated by the fact that Kerouac wrote the introduction to the U.S. edition of *The Americans* (published in 1959). The link is further strengthened by the fact that the photographs were taken by Frank on a road trip across America in 1955-1956. Most importantly, and also invoking *On the Road*, they stand in stark contrast to the 1950s of the Eisenhower era. *The Americans* portray all socioeconomic strata, but the very inclusion of the poor, the marginalized, the freaks and outsiders, as *Americans*, make Franks work a sociopolitical statement. By aligning photographs of cocktail parties, Yale students, the political elite, and Hollywood movie premieres, with pictures of African Americans, Jews, Jehovah’s witnesses, rodeo cowboys, and male prostitutes, *The Americans* complicates our image of 1950s America and challenges the neatness of national ideology. In the words of Kerouac, “Anybody doesnt like these pitchers dont like potry, see? Anybody dont like potry go home see Television shots of big hatted cowboys being tolerated by kind horses.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Wright, 512.

<sup>79</sup> Laderman, 23-34.

<sup>80</sup> Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

<sup>81</sup> Jack Kerouac, introduction to Robert Frank, *The Americans* (New York: Grove Press, 1959; First Pantheon Edition, New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 8 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

This means that, paralleling *On the Road*, *The Americans* reject the fallacies of conformity and suburban middle class consumerism. *Stranger than Paradise* accordingly distances itself from the values of Reaganism by incorporating in its cinematography the unusual style of Frank's, including odd focus, low lighting, and grainy black/white print (compare figure 10 and figure 11). Moreover, Jarmusch's mise-en-scène invokes the subjects of *The Americans*; both works value the marginal over the mainstream, and the seemingly insignificant over the obvious. (The homage to Robert Frank is finally made explicit in the end credits, under the "Special Thanks" section, an approach to intertextuality perfected in *Ghost Dog*).



Figure 10: *Stranger than Paradise* (screenshot)



Figure 11. Robert Frank, *U.S. 91*, *Leaving Blackfoot, Idaho*, 1956



Figure 12. *Stranger than Paradise* (screenshot)



Figure 13. Walker Evans, *Savannah Negro Quarter*, 1935

As mentioned, the origins of the road movie include Depression-era social conscience films, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Accordingly, complementing the parallels *Stranger* draws between the 1980s and the 1950s, we find, embedded in the allusions to Robert Frank, references to the 1930s as well. *The Americans* strongly resemble the work of Frank's artistic inspiration, photographer Walker Evans, both regarding choice of subjects and style.<sup>82</sup> Evans is best known for the work he did for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), 1935-1938, mapping the effects of the Depression. In posterity these images have become synonymous with the "other side" of the American Dream. Consequently, the cinematography of *Stranger*

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<sup>82</sup> On the links between Jarmusch, Kerouac, Frank, and Evans, see Suárez, 35-37.

extends its allusions to include the political and social circumstances of the 1930s (compare figure 12 and figure 13). The stagflation of the late 1970s and early 1980s resemble the Great Depression in the sense that they were both periods of recession that disrupted a lot of people's lives, but they starkly contrast each other concerning the policies developed to curb the recessions. Witness the economic crises as perceived in 1931 and 1982, by James Truslow Adams and Robert Lekachman, respectively:

We point with pride to our "national income," but the nation is only an aggregate of individual men and women, and when we turn from the single figure of total income to the incomes of individuals, we find a very marked injustice in its distribution.<sup>83</sup>

[Reagan's] administration has been engaged in a massive redistribution of wealth and power for which the closest precedent is Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, with the trifling difference that FDR sought to alleviate poverty and Ronald Reagan enthusiastically enriches further the already obscenely rich.<sup>84</sup>

Combined, the two observations reveal both the similarities and the discrepancies between the two periods. First, both periods experienced economic recession. However, whereas the policies of the Roosevelt administration reflected the support for views such as Adams,' that the "marked injustice in . . . distribution" needed to be addressed, in the early 1980s, far from everyone shared Lekachman's interpretation. Therefore, in practice, and especially in rhetoric, the Reagan administration actually sought to contrast its supply-side economic remedy to the New Deal of the Roosevelt era. Reaganomics were portrayed as a return to the liberal, free market economics typically associated with the United States prior to the Great Depression. After the failure of Jimmy Carter's administration, a lot of constituents saw Reaganomics as the magic cure that would fix the nation. It is in this context that Jarmusch invokes the modern roots of the road movie. Whereas the allusions to the underground 1950s represent rebellion against the cultural conformity of Reaganism, the references to Depression aesthetics illuminate *Stranger's* opposition to the Reagan administration's economic policies. Therefore, in a cultural and political environment bedazzled by the spectacle of MTV, the glamour of *Dynasty*, and the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too economics of Reaganism, the sober, meditative allusions of *Stranger* actually appear radical, as rebellious a social comment as *On the Road* was in 1957.

Of course, the political agenda of *Stranger* is more subliminally conveyed than in the works of the Beat writers and the photographers to whom it refers. Still, in the postmodern

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<sup>83</sup> Adams, 410.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Lekachman, *Greed is not Enough: Reaganomics* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 3.

1980s, such an approach makes sense. As mentioned, many of its postmodern contemporaries, as well as many of its successors, such as *Thelma & Louise* (1991), portray the cultural rebellion of the road movie through reiterating its sexual and violent excess. However, in a postmodern culture saturated with such images, the images are stripped of meaning; “the representations that once secured a place are neurotically cut loose of any referent but themselves.”<sup>85</sup> Consequently, when all that is left are images without referent, they come across as ironic. Contrastingly, by instead referring to modern techniques, rather than content, *Stranger* is able to invoke the ideas of the road movie, the rebellion that the images of excess once represented. In other words, the oppositional sentiments of Jarmusch’s reiterate the works to which his film refers; it is only the expression that is changed, in order to more aptly address the sociopolitical context of the 1980s. Accordingly, *Stranger* avoids the pitfalls of irony, by applying modern rather than postmodern film techniques.

Still, as is the case in all of Jarmusch’s films, postmodernity is very much present in *Stranger than Paradise*. The characters are an interesting case in point. In the classic road movie the protagonists usually demonstrate what is essentially postwar youth culture rebellion. They are frustrated, often desperate individuals at odds with social conventions, searching for the true America on the road. In coherence with a rambling structure and open ending, the characters’ goal(s) prove unrealistic or are hindered by societal reactionary forces.<sup>86</sup> Although *Stranger* shares the open-ended, episodic structure of the classic road movie, its characters do not display any such desperation. Admittedly, they purport similar disenchantment with society, but there is a crucial difference. The characters rarely seem to expect anything more than they find. Wherever they go, they seem unimpressed, bored even, by their surroundings. Comments such as “looks familiar,” “it’s kind of a drag here, really,” and “what are we doing here?” do denote frustration, but rather than expressing disillusionment with the Dream, these utterances are more a confirmation of what they already knew, or at least suspected to be true. Willie, Eva, and Eddie go looking for the American Dream, but it is as if they are just going through the motions, playing out the characteristics of a road movie, but all the while aware of the futility of their charade. Debating leaving Cleveland and going back to New York, Eddie utters, “You know, it’s funny, you come to someplace new and everything looks the same.” Willie’s response, “No kidding, Eddie,” reveals the lack of surprise at such a realization. The film and its characters

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<sup>85</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 152.

<sup>86</sup> Laderman, 16-19.

cannot make their minds up regarding the American Dream. They simultaneously reject it as naive all the while they (apparently) keep searching for it.

This brings us to an important aspect of the road movie and the American Dream. At the heart of the Dream, and which the road movie is an expression of, is a yearning for freedom. And, as Cullen points out, at the heart of all notions of freedom lies a sense of agency. Agency, to be in control of your own destiny, is therefore an important aspect of all American Dreams.<sup>87</sup> *Stranger* is truly postmodern in its ambiguous approach to the question of agency. As mentioned, Jarmusch's characters are seemingly aware of the futility of their road trip. Significantly, though, this does not seem to bother them. Their inaction is seemingly by choice. They reject their contemporary culture's dream of excess, and instead seem content with the unglamorous grittiness of real existence. In other words, by demonstrating the incongruities between myth and reality - through visiting the places about which they in the beginning display preconceived notions - they demonstrate the futility in chasing a dream that can never be fully realized. Especially Eddie expresses this disparity between dream/myth and reality. Although he has never before visited either Cleveland or Florida, he "knows" that they are beautiful places, thereby demonstrating the power of dreams/myths. Inevitably, therefore, his preconceived notions of Florida as comprising white beaches, girls in bikinis, pelicans and flamingoes are contrasted with *Stranger*'s disappointing realization of "Paradise."

And still, in spite of the "evidence" the characters are presented with, they apparently keep dreaming of the Coast, as discussed above. In some ways, Jarmusch's film foreshadows Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). Similar to Coupland's, Jarmusch's characters reject yuppie culture. Still, whereas Gen-X discards the Dream, or rather the search for the Dream, by leaving middle class jobs for so-called "McJobs," the approach of Willie, Eddie, and Eva is conformist in their unabated search for easy money. As reflected by Willie's comment, "imagine working in a factory," as well as Eva's disregard of her McJob, *Stranger* does not possess *Generation X*'s postmodern view of menial labor as glorified by images of popular culture. Rather, the protagonists of *Stranger* continue to believe in the Dream of The Coast. Although they reject the Dream of Upward Mobility, as represented by their "log cabin to White House" president, Ronald Reagan, they keep putting their two cents in. Quite literally, therefore, the American Dream is reduced to a game of chance. Ambiguity and contradiction shape all of Jarmusch's films, and *Stranger* certainly is no exception.

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<sup>87</sup> Cullen, 10.



## The Immigrant Experience

As delineated in our close reading of the opening sequences, *Stranger than Paradise* includes immigrants and immigration among its main concerns. Consequently, two out of its three characters are immigrants. Eva is what we might refer to as a sojourner, while Willie is first generation immigrant. Eddie, although his story is never told, is apparently American born and raised. The reason for this emphasis on immigrants is functional. In *Stranger*, the immigrant functions as the purest expression of the American Dream. According to Leara D. Rhodes, immigration created the very concept of the American Dream.<sup>88</sup> There is some validity to this argument. After all, as explained above, the national ideology that is the American Dream can be traced back to the first settlers, in other words, to immigrants. In fact, the notion that the United States is a nation of immigrants is still widespread. This notion is of course not entirely true, since Native Americans hardly can be called immigrants, having inhabited the land for thousands of years before the nation was even conceived of, and the forefathers of most African Americans were brought to America involuntarily as slaves, and many Hispanics inhabited parts of America before they, through annexation and conquest, became part of the United States. Nonetheless, what unites these peoples is the fact that they became Americans by circumstance, often against their will. Contrarily, the immigrant represents the voluntary acquiescence to the hopes and aspirations that comprise the American Dream: “The United States was essentially a creation of the collective imagination – inspired by the existence of a purportedly New World, realized in a Revolution that began with an explicitly articulated Declaration, and consolidated in the writing of a durable Constitution. And it is a nation that has been re-created as a deliberate act of conscious choice every time a person has landed on these shores. Explicit allegiance, not involuntary inheritance, is the theoretical basis of American identity.”<sup>89</sup>

Consequently, Jarmusch’s approach, to explore the American Dream from the perspective of the immigrant, is essentially to view it from an *American* perspective. Similarly, and foreshadowing *Ghost Dog*’s approach to ethnicity, *Stranger* is not interested in any specific national or ethnic group of immigrants, but in the very *image* of immigration. Therefore, seeking to portray the iconography of the American immigrant, *Stranger* alludes to the most iconic period in American immigration history. Between 1880 and 1930 more than 22 million

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<sup>88</sup> Leara D. Rhodes, *The Ethnic Press: Shaping the American Dream* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 31.

<sup>89</sup> Cullen, 6.

people immigrated to the United States.<sup>90</sup> Often referred to as the third wave, Jarmusch exploits the viewer's familiarity with cinematic portrayals of this period, as it has been frequently portrayed on film, and as viewers consequently identify its imagery as representative of American immigration.

Such an approach allows *Stranger* not only to draw links between past and present, but to debate American immigration as a timeless expression of the search for the American Dream. Our close reading of the opening sequences reveals the way Jarmusch uses mise-en-scène, cinematography, wardrobe, and music as references to the past, or rather, to celluloid renditions of the past. This approach is continued throughout the film. One example is the first scene showing Willie and Eva at Willie's kitchen table. The framing of the scene, shot straight at the old-fashioned table and window, with Willie to the right, and Eva to the left, in combination with their indistinct wardrobe, allude to countless cinematic depictions of the plight of first generation immigrants. As the melancholic string suite joins the image, the parallel is complete. (Personally, it reminds of Francis Ford Coppola's portrait of Vito Corleone and his young family in their tiny New York apartment in *The Godfather: Part II*). Similar allusions are made in the first scene of "One Year Later," the card-game scene where Willie and Eddie are accused of cheating. Again, the mise-en-scène - the old, generic apartment, in combination with wardrobe (one of the players wears a white shirt, a black vest, and bow-tie, and sports an old-fashioned hair cut) - is more reminiscent of typical portrayals of the 1900s, than of the 1980s.

Another way *Stranger* incorporates the past is through the character of Willie. As demonstrated by his telephone conversation with Aunt Lotte, his approach to assimilation seems strangely outdated. In the 1980s, it seems excessive for a Hungarian immigrant to completely reject his culture, his language, and even his name (his original name is Bela), all in the name of Americanization. Jarmusch conveys Willie's enthusiastic approach to assimilation by surrounding the character with iconography of American "tradition:" Willie eats American TV-dinner, watches American football and cartoons on TV, and incorporates American slang in his vocabulary. Comically, his conformist tendencies have made him a blueprint of his American friend Eddie. Underlined by their physical similarities, they look like twins, both favoring 1950s style clothing and fedora hats. Just how desperately Willie wants to be regarded a full-blooded American is made explicit when Eddie finds out about Willie's hidden background. Astonished, he exclaims, "I thought you were an American."

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<sup>90</sup> Rhodes, 31.

Willie's emphatic response, "Hey, I'm as American as you are!" denotes a fear of ethnocentrism that seems rather misplaced in the contemporary setting of the film.

The function of Willie's archaic approach to Americanization is twofold. First, it continues the past as present approach. It represents a past when Eastern Europeans were in fact discriminated against. Periods of ethnocentrism in American immigration history usually coincide with periods of economic downturn. Furthermore, significant change in immigrant demographics has often elicited fears that the new groups will prove inassimilable to the established American culture. Up until the 1860s, most immigrants originated from Northern and Western Europe. Consequently, when the third wave brought massive influx of immigrants from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, fears erupted in discrimination, which was institutionalized in the Immigration Act of 1924. The national origins system of this act favored immigrants from the "old" countries, as the quotas were based on the census of 1890. Such fears, combined with a view of acculturation represented by the melting pot theory, meant that many immigrants approached Americanization by rejecting their past. In part due to large immigrant communities, most probably did not go as far as Willie does, but it is this past, or rather, this view of the past, that his particular take on assimilation refers to.

More realistic in the contemporary context of the film is Eva's approach to her new environment. It functions as a contrast to the approach of Willie, highlighting its absurdity. As Willie grudgingly tries to teach Eva about the "American Way" she must conform to, Eva's response varies from curious amusement to obstinate indifference. For instance, Willie's failed attempt at explaining her the intricacies of American football is met by a decisive "I think this game is really stupid." Similarly, Willie buys her a dress on the notion that if "you come here – you should dress like people dress here." Refusing to conform, however, Eva throws the dress in the trash the minute she is out of the apartment. Although *Eastern European*, as a Caucasian, Eva is in 1980s America not regarded as threatening to the American majority, and she is consequently free to choose her own identity (a concept made primary thematic concern in *Ghost Dog*, as discussed above).

By invoking the past as present, Willie also informs *Stranger's* relation to its contemporary context. As mentioned, by the 1980s, Hungarians had long since been assimilated into mainstream American culture. However, by infusing past discrimination in a contemporary setting, *Stranger* inevitably reflects ethnocentrism of its own time. Social and political changes of the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights movement, resulted in corresponding changes in immigration laws, embodied in the Immigration and Nationality Act amendments of 1965. It abolished the national origins system, and, intended or not, resulted in a shift in

immigration demographics from Europe to Asia and Latin America. Consequently, by the economic recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s, it had become evident that this shift in immigration policy was altering the ethnic demographics of the United States, and, corresponding with past trends, ethnocentrism once again was on the rise. Consequently, through its past as present approach, *Stranger* points to the circular movement of history and the way we tend to repeat the mistakes of the past. Moreover, by demonstrating the absurdity of Willie's fears in the contemporary setting of the film, *Stranger* also points to the historically successful integration of groups once deemed inassimilable, thereby also predicting the eventual integration of groups regarded as "un-American" in the 1980s.

Yasujiro Ozu

Preceding *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*, intertextual references in *Stranger than Paradise* inform and elaborate upon its thematic concerns. Significantly, the films of Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu comprise some of the most important allusions in *Stranger*. Their stylistic and thematic characteristics deepen our understanding of the American Dream as envisioned by Jarmusch. *Stranger* specifically refers to three of Ozu's films. In "The New World," as Eddie and Willie prepare a trip to the races, Eddie reads aloud the listed horses from a newspaper. Most of the horses' names correspond to American idioms, such as Indian Giver and Inside Dope, but at the end of the list, we find *Passing Fancy*, *Late Spring*, and *Tokyo Story*. These three films illuminate the way Ozu functions as contrast to *Stranger's* sociopolitical context of the 1980s and Reaganism.

Significantly, *Passing Fancy* (1933), *Late Spring* (1949), and *Tokyo Story* (1953), through their stylistic minimalism and thematic emphasis on the importance of family over materialism and careerism, correspond to *Stranger's* stylistic and thematic concerns and preferences, as also represented by its references to the 1930s and 1950s and the works of Kerouac, Frank, and Evans. Furthermore, they also correspond to the same historical periods. All three films deal with characters torn between family obligations and personal ambitions in a changing society of increasing demands and expectations.<sup>91</sup> The two latter works carry the added dimension of having been made during the transformative period of the Occupation era, and as such, reflects the difficulties of reconciling old values of Japanese tradition with modern, and to a large extent, western values in an increasingly affluent, but inevitably also

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<sup>91</sup> On *Passing Fancy*, *Late Spring*, and *Tokyo Story*, see David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), 248-252, 307-312, 328-333.

more materialistic society. Basically, Ozu argues a compromise between old and new, which has been referred to as “Occupation-tinted liberalism.”<sup>92</sup> His films side with characters that are able to interpret the humanist elements of the old traditions to fit modern times. For instance, in *Tokyo Story*, the father-in-law of a widow urges her (against tradition) to remarry, after she has proven herself to care more about her in-laws than their own, career-focused children.

By intertextually incorporating such concerns in *Stranger*, Jarmusch emphasizes his film’s opposition to the American Dream as represented by Ronald Reagan. Simultaneously an embodiment of both the Dream of Upward Mobility and the Dream of the Coast, the president was in many ways himself an image of the values his administration communicated. Originating from humble beginnings, Reagan corresponded to the “log cabin to White House” myth of Lincoln. Furthermore, his background as a Hollywood actor made him the “cowboy president,” legitimizing his hardline foreign policies, which *Stranger* comments in its introductory sequences. In sequence three, as Eva is walking down the streets of New York, graffiti on a wall she passes reads, “U.S. out of everywhere” and “Yankee, go home.” Written on a New York wall, the graffiti is an ironic comment on the aggressive foreign policies of the Reagan administration, as well as a reference to the oppositional New York underground scene that Jarmusch hails from, as if it was foreign territory, a cultural oasis in a barren land.

Thereby, the “writing on the wall” also reflects Reagan’s domestic policies. As explained above, Reagan’s domestic agenda mirrored his foreign tactics. Once a Democrat, the president and his administration now “concentrated most of their expenditure retrenchment upon Great Society programs designed to mitigate the misfortunes of the working poor, minorities, and welfare families.”<sup>93</sup> It is this callousness that *Stranger* criticizes by alluding to the works of Ozu. The problem of Reagan’s Horatio Alger story, as argued by *Stranger*, is the assumption that it could happen to anyone, if only they apply themselves, and reversed, that the poor only have themselves to blame. In such a context, Ozu’s merging of old and new correlate to *Stranger*’s appeal to the values of the 1950s and 1930s. The intertextual allusions to Ozu complement the film’s Depression era aesthetics and references to the cultural rebellion of the 1950s, in their collective warning against the dangers lurking beneath the surface of a society devoted to materialism, consumerism, political ethnocentrism, and cultural conformity.

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<sup>92</sup> Bordwell, 329.

<sup>93</sup> Lekachman, 4.

*Stranger* further parallels *Passing Fancy*, *Late Spring*, and *Tokyo Story* in the way style underlines thematic concerns. The most striking similarity is both filmmakers' emphasis on events that are irrelevant to the cause-effect chain of the narrative. This means that they leave in, and often dwell on, scenes that according to the classical Hollywood standard should never have even been shot. For instance, *Stranger* shows its characters vacuuming, watching TV, playing cards, drinking beer in silence, in short, performing tasks that normal people do. Such disregard for causality is stressed by minimal camera movement, which is reduced to slight pans. The camera sometimes follows the characters' movements, but is often "late," allowing characters to leave the frame before it reframes. Moreover, shots often feature so-called "empty space" at both ends, meaning that they begin before the characters are in frame and continue after they leave. As demonstrated by our reading of the opening, many shots even feature no camera movement, allowing the characters to walk in and out of frame seemingly haphazardly. The effect is an almost meditative slowing of pace. Commenting on this effect in *Tokyo Story*, Bordwell states, "the slackening of causality allows the film to make thematic material particularly salient."<sup>94</sup> This applies to *Stranger* as well. By discrediting causality, Jarmusch induces the viewer to contemplate the information that *is* provided. Contrasting Hollywood and MTV's action-oriented narrative, innovative film techniques, and fast cutting, *Stranger* slows things down, contrasting the rat race of yuppie culture. Significantly, combined with the focus on mundane actions, or in-action, the slow pace also offers the viewer the sensation of observing life "as it is." The style of *Stranger* therefore underlines its Depression/recession aesthetics' hyperreal version of America and the American Dream. It supports the thematic allusions to Ozu, calling for substance, reflection, and humanist values in an increasingly frenzied and materialistic society, while simultaneously self-authenticating its arguments through its imitation of real experience.

In conclusion, let us for a moment consider the title of Jarmusch's take on the American Dream, *Stranger than Paradise*. As discussed above, the notion of America as "paradise" reflects both the historical connotation of America as Edenic, as the New World, as well as the American Dream of fame and fortune, the Dream of the Coast. In both cases, however, "paradise" comprises a simplified understanding of the American Dream, as myth. Accordingly, Jarmusch's title reflects the film's attempt at contrasting myth by portraying the complexity of American experience, as *stranger* than paradise. The myth of America as paradise simply does not cover the multiplicity and intricacy of historicity and experience,

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<sup>94</sup> Bordwell, 329.

and *Stranger* consequently seeks to depict life “as it is.” Identifying the superficiality in its contemporary culture of Reaganism as representative of this myth, the film alludes to the 1950s and 1930s in order to expose the cultural conformism and socioeconomic inequalities of its own era, as well as self-consciously distinguish itself as an oppositional force. Similarly, its adherence to techniques and thematic concerns of Yasujiro Ozu is intended to emphasize this quiet revolt. The mythical notion of America as “paradise” is not only an *inadequate* simplification, but, even more to the point, it is an *unnecessary* simplification. “Reality” is a difficult concept, but what is certain, according to Jarmusch, is that it is far more complex, and far more interesting than myth. It is stranger than paradise.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

So far, the meaning of the title of my thesis, “Paradise Lost,” has not been addressed properly, although it lurks in the background of all my chapters. For anyone familiar with English literature, its connotations to John Milton are obvious enough. As mentioned in my discussion of *Dead Man*, *Paradise Lost* (1667) is an epic poem by the English poet. Its significance to our purpose derives from its attempt at reconciling the conflict between God’s eternal foresight and man’s free will. As delineated in my discussion, this conflict served as an inspiration for William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), which forms such an integral part of *Dead Man*. I deem it superfluous to repeat my entire analysis of *Dead Man*’s relation to Blake and Milton here, but suffice it to reiterate that “Paradise” represents man, and the world, in a utopian, ideal state of innocence. Consequently, applied to the work of Jarmusch, “Paradise Lost” refers to the loss of innocence, the loss of myth. In order to transcend myth, we must accept that, the seemingly contradictory states of innocence and experience are actually of equal importance, if we are to understand any human endeavor.

Accordingly, in *Dead Man*, the loss of innocence constitutes a revision of American history and identity to also include the marginalized, the problematic, and the darker aspects of western expansion. In *Ghost Dog*, the loss of innocence reflects the myths of Americanization and multiculturalism. Surpassing the simplifying models of the Melting Pot and the Salad Bowl, Jarmusch argues that the complex multiplicity that constitutes American ethnicity is to a large extent characterized by consent, but even consent-based ethnicity has not obliterated the problematic aspects of race and racism. And finally, in *Stranger than Paradise*, the loss of “paradise” means acknowledging that the American Dream of Reaganism comes short in explaining the contradictions that exist between past and present hopes for the American venture and the realities of contemporary society. In summation, therefore, “Paradise Lost” refers to the main agenda and strategy of Jarmusch’s work. The inherent danger of myth is that it passes itself off as *the* truth. Accordingly, in order to overcome myth, we need to recognize that, “without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, any attempt at describing reality, must concede that “paradise” is a lost cause, a dead end.

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<sup>95</sup> Blake, “The Argument,” 34.



Jarmusch's attack on myth conforms to the postmodern rejection of the existence of any Big Truth, or Grand Narrative. As such, all three films covered by my thesis are postmodern films. In place of the Grand Narrative, they present a multitude of stories, often contradictory, as explained above. Furthermore, postmodernism eschews known forms, a characteristic that has followed Jarmusch's work throughout his career. Both formally and thematically, *Stranger*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog* exhibit fundamental opposition against established rules, norms, and traditions. In many ways, Jarmusch's relation to postmodernism is therefore best understood as an overarching interdisciplinary category covering the sub-categorical approaches he chooses as means of conveying his thematic agenda.

A good example of this is the way he puts his work in a sociopolitical contemporary and historical context. Exploiting his own and the viewer's familiarity with images of past creative production, Jarmusch is able to simultaneously relate his films to both a contemporary and a past social context. In *Dead Man*, this is achieved by presenting present as past, while *Stranger than Paradise* invokes the past as present. Both cases, however, make references to cultural images that are transported out of their original, or familiar setting, and thereby awarded new meaning.

As such, Jarmusch's relation to past and present is closely related to his notion of intertextuality. All Jarmusch films heavily rely on intertextual references as a way of communicating different layers of meaning. The outline above, of *Dead Man*'s many references to William Blake, is a telling example of the intricate ways in which he is able to incorporate cultural references that carry with them their own allusions, in a seemingly unending chain of intertextual links. Moreover, the combination of intertextual references and the presentation of past as present/present as past allows Jarmusch to demonstrate his opposition against established rules and traditions, and the powers that be, as well as his allegiance to rebels and freethinkers, past and contemporary.

Especially *Stranger than Paradise* and *Dead Man* make use of this approach. In *Stranger*, staging the past as present, combined with allusions to the 1930s and 1950s, allows for likening Reaganism to the Eisenhower era. Similarly, the approach also self-consciously situates the film in a tradition of oppositional counterculture represented by the underbelly of the same periods. *Dead Man* essentially follows a very similar outline, only this time the presentation is reversed; present is presented as past. However, demonstration of opposition/allegiance is achieved exactly the same way. Through intertextual references to representatives of independent thought and cultural rebellion, stretching from William Blake

to the counterculture of the 1960s and contemporary indie darlings, *Dead Man* identifies itself as a critical voice, speaking up against manifest destiny and unrestrained capitalism.

The numerous ways in which Jarmusch makes individual intertextual references are too many to recount, varying from aesthetic allusions, such as the incorporation of cinematography invoking the photography of Evans and Frank in *Stranger*, to the unmistakable, book-in-front-of-camera references found in *Ghost Dog*. However, in *Ghost Dog*, Jarmusch takes intertextuality to a new level, by incorporating it as a character of its own right. The sheer extent of intertextual references, and the many ways in which they are presented, make the very concept of intertextuality a comment upon the film's thematic concern of consent in American ethnicity.

Comparing the three films of my study reveals that there has been a certain formal development in Jarmusch's work. On the whole, it is a progression towards a more sophisticated, less restricted film language. Whereas *Stranger* favors the minimalism of Yasujiro Ozu, restricting camera movement to slight pans, and most scenes to only one shot, both *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* are structurally and technically more varied, and more conventional, featuring more frequent cuts and rhythmically coalescing of image and sound. However, this should not be read as a move towards conformism. What aesthetically separates Jarmusch's earliest films from the mainstream, and what continued to distinguish his work in the 1990s, is his persistent irreverence towards the classical cinema norm of narrative focus. In fact, ellipsis and "dead time," representing a general focus on events irrelevant to the narrative cause-effect chain, characterize *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* as much as *Stranger than Paradise*. Consequently, although for instance *Ghost Dog* employs superimpositions, dissolves, and overlaps, they function as a reflection of the film's thematic concerns, the mix-and-match aspect of consent-based ethnicity, and are as such examples of the way form consistently follows function in Jarmusch's work.

The supremacy of function in Jarmusch's films also determines his relation to genre. Both *Stranger* and *Dead Man*'s revisions of the road movie and the western, respectively, function as backdrops on which the films' thematic agendas can be unfolded. Directly linked to his incorporation of intertextuality and simultaneous display of past and present images, Jarmusch exploits the viewer's understanding of genre in order to infuse his own revision of it with multilayered meaning. Consequently, the road movie informs *Stranger*'s ideas about the American Dream, while *Dead Man* explores American history and identity by referencing and revising the western. *Ghost Dog* relates to genre in much the same way, only instead of relying heavily on one genre to make its points, the film exploits the characteristics of

numerous genres, such as Asian martial arts movies and American gangster films, as an illustration of the multiplicity of American ethnicity.

## Legacy

The impact *Stranger than Paradise* had on Jarmusch's career can hardly be overestimated. It catapulted him into hipster stardom, through its critical and financial success. Significantly, though, it also jumpstarted American independent cinema, in general, and specifically the careers of Spike Lee, Kevin Smith, and Gus Van Sant.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, in the 1980s, his unpretentious style and rejection of cultural hierarchies played a significant part in breaking down audience perceptions of independent cinema as inaccessible art film. However, what has solidified his role as one of the most important American filmmakers of the past three decades, and perhaps *the* most important American independent filmmaker, has been his continued ability to stay relevant, as reflected by my discussion of his films. This aspect, combined with general critical success, and somewhat financial success (especially in Europe and Japan), has established his career as a blueprint for young filmmakers on how to stay independent in an increasingly concentrated film industry.

Regarding aesthetics, Jarmusch's minimalist style has noticeably influenced Tom DiCillo (who worked as a photographer on *Permanent Vacation*, *Stranger than Paradise*, and *Coffee and Cigarettes*), Hal Hartley, Sofia Coppola, and Richard Linklater.<sup>97</sup> Still, the most significant filmmaker clearly influenced by Jim Jarmusch is in my opinion Parisian Claire Denis, one of the most gifted auteurs of our time. She worked as an assistant director on *Down by Law* and is credited with "advice and inspiration" on *Night on Earth*. Although she graduated from film school in 1971, she did not release her first feature film, *Chocolat*, until 1988, and her international breakthrough came ten years later, with *Beau Travail/Good Work* (1998). Jarmusch's influence is visible in her focus on marginalized characters, such as immigrants, exiles, and outsiders. Furthermore, she is critical of (white) western ethnocentrism, and its myth of "progress." Concerning form, she has adopted Jarmusch's nonchalant attitude towards classical Hollywood standards, deemphasizing narrative structure in favor of metaphorical meanings. Moreover, she also depends heavily on intertextuality, and tends to go for unresolved, open endings. Often, nothing has changed at the end of her films,

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<sup>96</sup> Suarez, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

and no catharsis has been delivered.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, Denis is a representative of the globality of Jarmusch's legacy. Although my discussion reflects that Jarmusch is an American filmmaker, concerned with American myths, his concerns possess universal appeal. As shown, one of Jarmusch's most important arguments for why American myths are in need of demythification is their implicit notion of America as the Promised Land. *Stranger than Paradise*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog*, however, reflect the notion that, "to think of America as the model of redemption is . . . hypocritical by America's own revivalist standards . . . [It] is contrary to the need for *universal* regeneration."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "Claire Denis – Biography," *The European Graduate School: Graduate and Postgraduate Studies*, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/claire-denis/biography/> (August 31, 2011).

<sup>99</sup> Sollors, 261.

## FILMOGRAPHY

### *Stranger than Paradise* (1984)

Cinematography: Tom DiCillo

Editor: Jim Jarmusch, Melody London

Sound: Greg Curry, Drew Kunin

Music: John Lurie, Screamin' Jay Hawkins ("I Put a Spell on You")

Producer: Otto Grokenberger

Production Manager: Sara Driver

Cast: Eszter Balint (Eva), John Lurie (Willie), Richard Edson (Eddie), Cecilia Stark (Aunt Lottie), Danny Rosen (Billy), Rammellzee (beachside contact), Tom DiCillo (airline agent), Richard Boes (factory worker), Rockets Redglare (card player), Harvey Perr (card player), Brian J. Burchill (card player), Sara Driver (Eva's clone)

Production Company: Cinesthesia, Grokenberger Filmproduktion, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 89 min.

Premiere: May 16, 1984, at the Cannes Film Festival. U.S. Premiere: September 29, 1984, at the New York Festival

### *Dead Man* (1995)

Cinematography: Robby Müller

Editor: Jay Rabinowitz

Sound: Drew Kunin

Music: Neil Young

Art Direction: Ted Berner

Sets: Marit Allen

Special Effects Animation: Don Nolan

Producer: Demetra Macbride

Production Design: Robert Ziemicki

Cast: Johnny Depp (William Blake), Gary Farmer (Nobody), Robert Mitchum (Dick Dickinson), Crispin Glover (train stoker), John Hurt (factory manager), Gabriel Byrne (Charlie Dickinson), Lance Henriksen (Cole Wilson), Michael Wincott (Conway Twill), Mili Avital (Thel Russell), Billy Bob Thornton (Big George Drakoulous), Iggy Pop (Salvatore "Sally" Jenko), Eugene Byrd (Johnny "the Kid" Pickett), Jared Harris (Benmont Tench), Alfred Molina (trading post missionary), Michelle Trush (Nobody's girlfriend), Mark Bringleson (Lee), Jimmy Ray Weeks (Marvin), John North (Mr. Olafsen), Richard Boes (factory worker).

Production Company: Pandora Filmproduktion, JVC Entertainment Networks, New Market Capitalgroup, 12 Gauge Productions

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 121 min.

Premiere: May 26, 1995, at the Cannes Film Festival. U.S. theatrical release: May 10, 1996

*Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999)

Cinematography: Robby Müller

Editor: Jay Rabinowitz

Sound: Drew Kunin

Sound Designer and Editor: Chic Ciccolini III

Music: The RZA. Songs: Killah Priest ("From Then Till Now"), Willie Williams ("Armageddon Time"), Jimmy Lyons and Andrew Cyrille ("Nuba Time"), Public Enemy ("Cold Lampin' With Flavor")

Art Direction: Mario Ventenilla

Sets: Ron von Blomberg

Digital and Optical Effects: Don Nolan, John Furniotis

Producers: Richard Guay, Jim Jarmusch

Production Design: Ted Berter

Cast: Forest Whitaker (Ghost Dog), John Tormey (Louie Bonacelli), Cliff Gorman (Sonny Valerio), Henri Silva (Ray Vargo), Isaach de Bankolé (Raymond), Tricia Vessey (Louise Vargo), Victor Argo (Vinnie), Gene Ruffini (old don), Richard Portnow (Handsome Frank), Camille Winbush (Pearline), Frank Minucci (Big Angie), Frank Adonis (Sonny Valerio's bodyguard), Vinnie Vella (Sammy the Snake), Joe Rigano (Uncle Joe Rags), Gary Farmer (Nobody), Clebert Ford (pigeon breeder), Gano Frills, Touché Cornel, Jamie Hector (gangstas in red), Dreddy Kruger, Timbo King, Clay Da Raider, Dead and Stinking, Deflon Sallahr (rappers in blue), Roberto Lopez, Salvatore Alagna, Jerry Todisco (Ghost Dog's attackers), RZA (samurai in camouflage), Damon Whitaker (young Ghost Dog)

Production Company: Plywood Production, JVC, Le Studio Canal Plus, Bac Films, Pandora Film, ARD/Degeto Film

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), color, 116 min

Premiere: May 18, 1999. U.S. Premiere: February 10, 2000, at the PanAfrican Film Festival. U.S. theatrical release: March 3, 2000.

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